



Eating and Drinking Safely Away from Home

T R A V E L F A C T

Food- and water-borne diseases are the number one cause of illness for travelers, and traveler's diarrhea is the most frequent health complaint. Ensuring food and water safety takes little time and is invaluable in preventing potentially serious conditions, such as amebic dysentery, typhoid, and hepatitis A infection.

Don't drink the water

In some developing countries, tap water is unsafe to drink. Although most developed countries have safe water supplies, travelers are better off not drinking tap water while away from home.

Safe beverages include very hot coffee or tea, beer, wine, bottled water, and carbonated beverages. Carbonated bottled water is a traveler's best bet, as the carbonation ensures that the bottle was sealed after the beverage underwent processing and was not just filled from a local water tap. Wipe the tops of cans and bottles before you open them. If possible, open the container yourself, or watch someone else do it.

- Don't use tap water to brush your teeth.
- Avoid swallowing water when you shower or swim.
- If you must drink from a questionable water source, boil water for 5 minutes or use 1-2 iodine tablets per liter to disinfect it. Ten to fifteen drops of household bleach per gallon of water can also be used, but it does not disinfect as well as iodine. Water filters have not been proven effective.

Watch what you eat

Very hot, fully cooked food is safest to eat. Although some studies suggest that pepper-containing condiments, such as hot sauce, have bactericidal effects, do not rely on them to protect you from infection. Under- and uncooked meats and raw seafoods are best avoided. Travelers should also stay away from warm or homemade dairy products. Those who do not want to appear rude to hosts by refusing to eat local foods can prepare polite excuses in advance; an allergy to an ingredient or is one option.

Don't eat salads or uncooked vegetables and fruits. A fruit that you peel yourself such as a banana or an orange is safe. The traveler's dictum is, if you can't peel it; don't eat it. This is especially true in developing countries that use "night soil" (human excrement) as fertilizer.

Fish caught in the coral reefs of the West Indies, tropical Pacific, and Indian Oceans may carry toxins, even when thoroughly cooked. Most of these fish are probably safe to eat much of the time, although puffer fish and barracuda are best avoided at all times.

Avoid traveler's diarrhea

The precautions you take with food and water may help you avoid getting traveler's diarrhea.

Bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol®) - 30 mL 4

times a day or 2 to 4 tablets 4 times a day - helps some people avoid diarrhea when they also watch what they eat and drink. Don't use this medication for more than 3 weeks, and consult your health care provider if you taking other aspirin-containing medications.

If you do get diarrhea, an oral rehydration solution helps replace the fluids and salts that your body loses with frequent, loose bowel movements. Buy some solution or a mix at a pharmacy, or combine 12 oz of boiled water with ¼ teaspoon of baking soda, ½ teaspoon of sugar, and a pinch or two of table salt or table-salt substitute that contains potassium chloride. Alternate with canned, bottled, or boiled fruit juices or sugar-free soft drinks.

You can use bismuth subsalicylate to reduce the frequency of bowel movements. Take 30 mL of liquid or 2 tablets every 30 minutes for up to 8 doses. Loperamide (Imodium AD®) is another alternative.

Some physicians advocate antibiotics to prevent traveler's diarrhea despite the potential side effects of these agents and the risk of bacterial resistance. Talk to your doctor about whether taking antibiotics to prevent diarrhea is an option.

Get specific directions from your health care provider about what to do if your child or infant traveling with you gets diarrhea. This can be a life-threatening condition in young children - and in very old people. Be prepared!