

InStyle

Everything You Need to Know About Traveler's Diarrhea

You already know it's not fun, but here's what else you should know about the travel-related illness.



With the end of every vacation comes a harsh wakeup call—nothing shocks your system like going from the beach to the office. When you *also* get hit with traveler's diarrhea, it only makes matters 10x worse. TD is one of the most common travel-related illnesses, hitting anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of travelers depending on the season and location, according to the CDC. While it's usually mild, it still sucks. Here's everything you need to know about the causes, symptoms, and treatment of traveler's diarrhea.

What is traveler's diarrhea?

That's right: There's an official name for that special case of the runs that you get during or a few days after a trip. You get it consuming food or water that's contaminated with fecal bacteria, viruses, or parasites, says Niket Sonpal, M.D., an internist and gastroenterologist in New York City. That means passing three or more loose stools within 24 hours — plus potential nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, fever, and/or blood in the stools. No thanks.

Where is traveler's diarrhea the most common?

People who travel from a resource-rich to resource-poor area are at the highest risk of ending up with traveler's diarrhea. High-risk destinations include parts of Central and South America, Mexico, the Middle East, and most of Asia, according to the Mayo Clinic. (Fun fact: Traveler's diarrhea is also colloquially called Montezuma's revenge, especially if you picked it up in Mexico.) Eastern Europe and some Caribbean islands pose a medium risk. So, yeah, a good chunk of the globe.

How long does traveler's diarrhea last?

Traveler's diarrhea is usually short and sweet. It typically improves within one to two days, then completely clears up within a week, according to the Mayo Clinic. Since there are many different types of organisms that can cause diarrhea, it's hard to determine exactly how long the condition is contagious, says Dr. Sonpal.

How can you prevent traveler's diarrhea?

If you're visiting a high-risk area, you can improve your odds by avoiding unsterilized water and foods like undercooked meat, raw vegetables, street food, unpasteurized milk, and fruits that don't have peels that you remove before eating.

Some doctors will suggest taking bismuth subsalicylate (aka Peto-Bismol) as a preventive step. However, Dr. Sonpal personally doesn't recommend taking it in anticipation of traveler's diarrhea. Besides the inconvenience of having to pack a lot of it, it has the potential to cause salicylate poisoning, especially in people who take aspirin and pregnant women and children, he says. Ongoing studies are looking at whether taking probiotics might also help prevent traveler's diarrhea, but so far results have been inconclusive, according to the CDC.

What's the treatment for traveler's diarrhea?

Most cases are mild and go away on their own. In those instances, sports drinks can help replenish electrolyte loss, according to the CDC. "I tell most of my patients that if they develop traveler's diarrhea, they should begin treatment, wash their hands, and use bleach-based cleansers in their bathroom until symptoms resolve," says Dr. Sonpal. Doctors will typically prescribe antibiotics for more serious cases that come with fever or blood, pus, or mucus in the stools, or last longer than a week.

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