When planning a trip, one of the first things you should do is set up an appointment with your health care professional. ("Healthcare professional" refers to the physician or nurse you are consulting to determine your travel health needs. This might be the person you see on a regular basis or a travel medicine specialist.) Ideally, the appointment should take place about 2 months before your departure date. Some vaccines and preventive medications need to be started well in advance in order to be fully effective by the time you reach your destination. If you aren’t able to plan that far ahead, schedule the appointment as soon as possible—it is important to do whatever you can to protect your health while traveling.

Along with food, water and insect precautions, vaccines can greatly reduce your risk for certain diseases. You have likely been vaccinated against many "childhood" diseases, such as measles and mumps, and may already be immune to them. However, not all countries have been able to achieve a high rate of vaccination, and some diseases that are no longer a threat in developed countries are serious problems in developing countries.

Routine Immunizations
Check your family records or with your health care professional to make sure you have been immunized against measles, mumps, rubella; diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis; varicella; and polio. One type of meningococcal vaccine is given routinely to some children, teens and college students.

Even if you have been previously immunized, your healthcare professional may recommend a booster dose of tetanus/diphtheria/pertussis (Tdap) or tetanus/diphtheria (Td). A booster dose of polio vaccine may also be recommended for those traveling to an area where polio still occurs. All persons age 6 months and older should receive an annual flu immunization.

Vaccines that protect against human papillomavirus are available for use in persons ages 9-26 years. A vaccine that protects against herpes zoster virus (shingles) is available for persons ages 50 years and older.

If you are traveling with children whose immunizations are not complete, their schedules can usually be accelerated to provide protection during travel.

Required Vaccines
Under International Health Regulations, health officials of some countries are allowed to require proof of yellow fever vaccination as a condition of entry. Some countries will require yellow fever vaccination for entry if you have also visited certain other countries during your trip. Check requirements carefully to avoid problems. A single dose of yellow fever vaccine protects for 10 years; it must be given at least 10 days (but not more than 10 years) before entry into the country where it is required.
Cholera vaccination is rarely recommended for travelers. No country currently requires cholera vaccination for entry, although some local government representatives may ask for it despite official policy. Cholera vaccine is not available in the U.S., but it is available in Canada and elsewhere.

To document your vaccination status, you will need an International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis, signed and dated when your vaccines are given. The Certificate is recognized worldwide, and if you do not have one you may be denied entry to countries or even vaccinated on the spot which is not desirable. If any injections are necessary, insist that sterile disposable needles and freshly opened vaccine vials are used. Some people bring their own needles and syringes when they travel.

In the event that you cannot receive a "required" vaccine (e.g., because of an allergy to the vaccine or due to the unavailability of the vaccine), your healthcare professional may choose to provide you with a medical exemption letter.

Special Considerations

Under special circumstances, you may be required to receive additional vaccines or testing for entry to a specific country. For example, those who participate in an annual pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj or Umra) are required to produce a certificate of vaccination against meningococcal meningitis issued not more than 3 years and not less than 10 days before arrival in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia requires proof of polio immunization with oral polio vaccine (OPV) for travelers less than age 15 years coming from countries with wild polio virus and for all travelers, regardless of age, coming from Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Pakistan. All of these persons will also be given a dose of OPV upon arrival in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia also recommends immunization against influenza.

Many countries have additional health-related requirements for long-term visitors; in some cases these apply to persons staying just a few weeks.

When you receive your visa application, review it in detail and check for all health measures required for entry. If you will be affiliated with any agency, institution, or organization during your stay, ask your contacts if they know of any official or unofficial requirements.

Other Travel-Related Vaccines

There are vast differences in standards of healthcare throughout the world. Many developing countries do not have access to the finances or personnel needed to enforce strict public health standards. Disease outbreaks can occur suddenly and spread rapidly. In some countries, there are risks of serious complications from medical treatments that are questionable or even dangerous.

Depending on your destination and the length and nature of your stay, your health care provider might recommend additional vaccines or preventive medications to help reduce your chance of contracting specific illnesses. The 2 most important factors to consider are whether you will be traveling to areas where the risk of disease is greater than it is at home and whether your activities there will put you at risk of contracting these diseases. Search for up-to-date information about current conditions in the countries you will be visiting. Some travel-related vaccines that might be recommended include hepatitis A and B, Japanese encephalitis, typhoid, rabies, cholera, yellow fever and meningococcal.

Adapted from Shoreland Inc. and Travax's Medical Library

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