

Travelling abroad carries some health risks. The Travel Healthy series of leaflets will help you to understand some of these risks and what precautions you can take to ensure you enjoy your trip and travel healthy. The leaflets explain which diseases you may need protection against and how you can minimise the risk of infection. Medical staff at your doctor's surgery can provide further information and advice – you should consult them 6-8 weeks before travelling.

What is Polio?

Poliomyelitis (polio) is a highly contagious and infectious disease caused by the polio virus. It enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the throat and intestines. The disease attacks the nervous system and can cause paralysis, which is often permanent. In the most severe cases, polio can be fatal.

What are the symptoms?

Polio infections can produce symptoms with varying degrees of severity. The majority of individuals have no symptoms or flu-like symptoms appearing 3 to 21 days after infection. Less than 1% of people develop paralytic polio and experience symptoms including fever, headaches, vomiting, constipation, stiffness in the neck and back with or without paralysis and pain in the limbs.

How is it contracted?

Transmission of the polio virus most often occurs through faecal-oral contact – as a result of poor hand washing and ingestion of contaminated food or water, and more rarely by person to person contact as the virus is also carried in saliva. Those infected with the virus can excrete the virus in their stools for several weeks but are most contagious 7 to 10 days before and after the onset of symptoms.

How is it treated?

There is currently no cure for polio. Instead, treatment focuses on easing pain and discomfort, speeding recovery, and preventing complications, through use of painkillers, undergoing physiotherapy, getting lots of rest, etc.

Who is at risk?

Certain groups of people will be at greater risk than others.

These include:

- Overseas travellers visiting the areas detailed below. The risk is highest for those visiting areas with poor sanitation.

- All infants and young children who missed having a polio vaccination as part of their childhood schedule.

Where are you at risk?

Polio has been eliminated in almost all countries, and the number of cases worldwide have fallen from 35,200 in 1988 (when global eradication was initiated), to around 700 in 2003. Travellers to Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Nigeria should ensure they are immunised. Travellers to other areas with poor sanitation may also be at risk.

Protecting Yourself Against Polio

Vaccination

The polio vaccine is usually only available as an inactivated (killed) injectable vaccine, and as part of a combined vaccine. For travellers it is usually combined with tetanus and diphtheria. Vaccination is available through your doctor's surgery.

When should you be vaccinated?

Infants should be vaccinated with a series of doses at an early age, and then boosters given before starting and leaving school as per the immunisation schedule. Individuals born before 1958 may not have been vaccinated as part of the childhood immunisation programme, and should check whether they need to complete a polio vaccination programme as adults. Anyone considering travel to an area where the disease still occurs should consult his or her practice nurse or doctor for polio vaccination advice. If you have never been vaccinated against polio, you can have your first dose at any time, followed by two more doses at intervals of four weeks. Although a booster dose is not routinely necessary for adults, it is advisable for those exposed to continuing risk – travellers to high-risk areas and healthcare workers exposed to the polio virus – to have a single booster dose every 10 years. Check with your practice nurse

6-8 weeks before travelling, and they will advise on an appropriate vaccination schedule for you.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

As with most vaccinations, some people may have tenderness and redness at the site of the injection. Reactions like fever, fatigue, or headache may occur. Other side effects may rarely occur, in which case you should consult your doctor or nurse. Polio cannot be contracted directly from the inactivated vaccine.

Is there anyone who should not be vaccinated?

There are some people for whom vaccination may not be recommended. Consult your doctor or practice nurse for specific advice.

What other precautions can you take against polio?

Before you travel and whilst you are abroad, it is worth considering all of the general travel tips in this leaflet. In addition, there are a number of simple precautions that you can take to help reduce the risk from polio:

- Good hygiene and hand washing
- Avoid swimming in non-chlorinated water that may be contaminated with sewage
- Use boiled, sterilised or bottled water for drinking, washing food, and cleaning teeth
- Avoid: ice cream, ice, salads
 - Raw shellfish
 - Uncooked fruit or vegetables unless you peel them yourself
 - Unpasteurised milk and milk products
 - Food and beverages from street vendors
- Cook food thoroughly and serve hot

General precautions against infections

There are a number of simple precautions that you can take to reduce the risk of infection from a number of diseases:

- Always wash your hands after using the toilet and before preparing or eating food
- Use boiled, sterilised or bottled water for drinking, washing food, and cleaning teeth
- Avoid:
 - ice cream, ice, salads
 - Raw shellfish
 - Uncooked fruit or vegetables unless you peel them yourself
 - Unpasteurised milk and milk products
 - Food and beverages from street vendors
- Cook food thoroughly and serve hot
- Do not share anything which might have blood on it such as a razor or toothbrush
- Do not share needles or drug-taking equipment
- Do not get a tattoo or body-piercing in a foreign country
- Avoid unprotected casual sex
- To protect yourself from infectious insects, use insect repellent and cover up - particularly at dusk and dawn – and keep windows closed at night
- Avoid contact with local animals as they may carry rabies

General tips for Healthy Travelling

- Visit your GP or practice nurse 6-8 weeks before travelling to discuss your requirements, including vaccinations required and first aid equipment you should take
- Ensure you have enough prescription medicine for your trip, and carry it in your hand luggage
- Take out medical insurance, and obtain a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) for free medical care within the EU (available at www.dh.gov.uk)
- To help prevent deep vein thrombosis (DVT), stand up and walk around the cabin as often as possible
- Avoid over-exposure to the sun (strongest between 11am – 3pm); apply appropriate strength sun block every two hours
- Avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of fluid and avoiding alcohol