



HAVE FUN, STAY SAFE

on your winter vacation

With a little bit of preparation, you can make sure to get the most out of your winter travels

By ANNE GEORG

Albertans fall under two distinct winter vacation styles: the sun-seekers and the snow-seekers. Both generally have to travel to their preferred sun or snow destination. And they all want to have fun. Any seasoned traveller will tell you preparation is the key to a fun holiday, which also means a safe and healthy holiday.

Travelling is inherently risky, so the wise vacationer will take whatever preventative measures possible, including visiting a travel clinic that can set them up with prescriptions and antibiotics, as well as general travel advice.

No matter where you're headed, it is a good idea to see a doctor before you go. And while they can help you get prepared, it is up to you to make your safety a priority once you're away.

"Realistically, the services we offer at the clinic are able to help prevent the infectious diseases," says Colleen Jeffery, team lead at Alberta Health Services' Calgary International Travel Clinic. "That's only about one percent of the health risks people may encounter when they travel. By far the biggest risks for mortality are heart attacks and injury."

Karen Effa, a public health nurse at AHS's Travelers' Health and Immunization Business Unit in Edmonton, has been working at her job for 16 years.





Before you go

No matter if by plane, train or automobile, this short checklist will help you start your vacation on the right foot.

- Contact your local AHS travel clinic and visit your family doctor.
- Ensure your vaccinations are up-to-date.
- Take out travel health insurance to supplement your Alberta Healthcare Insurance.
- Bring a list of your destination's internationally approved medical centres.
- Regularly check the credentials and safety record of your tour or sport providers. These can vary greatly, especially in other countries.

Learn more online

The Internet should *not* be your first and last resource when it comes to getting ready for travel, but it is a great place to find a doctor, clinic and up-to-date information as you make travel plans.

- Find a list of health clinics in Alberta offering travel health services at albertahealthservices.ca. Search for travel health services.
- Find out about extended Alberta Healthcare coverage information at health.gov.ab.ca.
- For a listing of travel clinics worldwide, visit the International Society of Travel Medicine website at istm.org.
- Find suggestions for items to pack in your health kit at applemag.ca.
- Download a copy of *Well on Your Way: A Canadian's Guide to Healthy Travel Abroad* at travelhealth.gc.ca.
- Keep track of the most recent health travel advisory bulletins; see the link at applemag.ca.



She says mishaps remain the number one health risk to vacationers.

"When people are on vacation, they relax and let their guard down," Effa says. "They tend to drink more and they become more prone to injuries." And, in some destinations, traffic may not be orderly and sidewalks may be poorly maintained, adding to injury risk.

"You can't get immunized for injuries and you can't take a pill to prevent them, either," she says. "It's a matter of being cautious."

Some things, like the mishap-prone tourist, never change. But over the course of their careers, Effa and Jeffery have noticed new trends in vacationers. In general, more people are travelling as a family and need to be vigilant of their children's health.

"Any parents vacationing with children need to think of a vacation that is suitable for the children, not themselves," Jeffery says. "Make sure you don't go far from medical assistance and pace your day to the children's energy levels."

Seniors, too, need to pace themselves. More and more elderly people are travelling to higher-risk areas. As they tend to have more existing health conditions than the general population, they need to assess their health and the risks of their destination.

"Seniors need to take along their meds," Effa says. "And they need to be careful to adapt slowly to hot climates as they are at highest risk of getting a heart attack." It is also important they get their flu shots before travelling.

Alberta bound

Albertans vacationing close to home need to prepare and exercise caution.

Many snow vacations centre around activities like skiing or snowboarding, and even avid outdoor athletes must keep their safety in mind. "I recommend to my patients that they ski well within their abilities and within the ski hill boundaries," says Vulcan-based Dr. Leonard Wade. "I ask them about previous knee injuries, how often they ski and how long they've been skiing."

Wade is an avid skier and well knows the physical demands of the sport. He

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— Colleen Jeffery, AHS's Calgary International Travel Clinic



advises his patients adopt a fitness regime before they go on their ski vacations. For downhill skiers, he suggests lifting weights to build leg strength. For cross-country skiers, Wade says cardio exercises are good preparation for the aerobically demanding sport.

Nancy Staniland, manager of the AHS Provincial Injury Prevention Team, recommends downhill skiers and snowboarders of all ages wear an appropriate helmet (see “Kids stuff,” pg. 20). She also says new and novice skiers can reduce the risk of injury by taking lessons from a professional.

After the ski vacation begins, skiers need to monitor their energy levels. “Don’t take the last run,” Wade cautions, admitting he knows from experience that this is more difficult than it sounds. And he says the third day of skiing is often when skiers are tired and get injured. “Take it easier on day three and get some rest,” he suggests.

Heading abroad

Before boarding a plane to your far-off destination, check with AHS’ travel clinics about country-specific health risks, the potential of contracting an infectious disease and preventing travel-related illnesses. These and numerous other clinics can give you the vaccinations recommended for

travel in some regions of the world. Also visit your doctor to get advice specific to your unique health conditions.

“One of the biggest concerns I have when people travel is that they are taking blanket advice from websites,” says Jeffery. “They go to the web and read about what they need to travel in Thailand. But the risks totally depend on the type of travel.

“Are you going to be staying in a five-star hotel, or are you backpacking? Are you eating in the hotel or buying food from street vendors? What are your existing health conditions? Two people going to exactly the same place for the same length of time have very different risks.”

Jeffery adds the advice she gives her clients is as fluid as the global situation, which is constantly in flux. “Risks change after natural disasters, like the Pakistan flood or the Haiti earthquake, or infec-

tious outbreaks like H1N1,” she explains.

Remember to be aware of the food and beverages you consume on your winter vacation, especially in hot climates. More than 30 percent of travellers contract diarrhea during their vacation.

“Take precautions,” Effa stresses, adding that good handwashing is essential. “You don’t want to spend several days of your week-long vacation recovering from diarrhea.”

Effa advises vacationers pack an over-the-counter diarrhea medicine and an antibiotic, like ciprofloxacin, which you can get from your doctor before you go. She says a moderately effective vaccine for diarrhea is available at travel clinics, but shouldn’t be relied on. She also recommends vaccination against hepatitis A and B, which attacks the liver and is contracted from contaminated food and water. *a*