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Health Matters: Remedies for the Road

By Laura Landro | May 9, 2011

Ah, the pleasures of planning a summer vacation: exotic destinations, new adventures, a break from the daily routines of home.

After a certain age, though, it's also important to plan for health hazards. In addition to the vaccines recommended for many countries, it's a good idea to get a prescription for an antibiotic like Cipro in case you encounter a case of traveler's diarrhea, and to stock up on anti-malarial drugs if you are visiting countries where the disease is endemic.

It's also wise to anticipate some of the things that can go wrong when you are far from your doctor and the corner pharmacy, from more prosaic issues like dental problems to serious medical emergencies and complications of existing health conditions. As a frequent traveler, chronic worrier and germ freak, I think about everything that can go wrong from head to toe, and pack accordingly.

More Vulnerable

As we age, our bodies can become more susceptible to issues such as heat exhaustion, dehydration, and just simple fatigue and stomach upsets. We are less likely to be able to withstand the microbes that may lurk in the food sold by street vendors in Asian countries or the fresh sugarcane drinks on the beach in Brazil. Heavy air pollution in countries like China can take a greater toll on our lungs and exacerbate chronic conditions like asthma. And older adults are at higher risk of problems like blood clots in the legs from long plane journeys...

Paul Auerbach, a Stanford University physician and author of "Medicine for the Outdoors," recommends a thorough dental exam before trips, because loose or cracked teeth, abscesses or gum disease can turn into problems far from home.

Watch Your Step

Dr. Auerbach notes that wearing bifocal glasses to correct the classic over-50 vision issue—presbyopia, or the inability to focus on objects nearby—can lead to stumbles and falls; the lower part of the glasses, meant for reading, can blur the image down at your feet. He suggests wearing distance glasses or contact lenses and using walking sticks for rough terrain, and keeping reading glasses in a pocket.

Another essential, according to Dr. Auerbach: a medical-evacuation insurance plan for the worst-case scenario. Sandy and John Searles, now both 68, were hunting on a remote mountain in Ethiopia two years ago when Mr. Searles's eyes glazed over and he began gasping for breath. His wife recognized that he was having a stroke, and with the help of their guides she got him down the mountain for the 4½-hour drive to Addis Ababa to seek medical attention.

Ms. Searles had a purchased a medical-evacuation plan from Boston-based Global Rescue, which works with medical experts at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to assist members who run into health problems while traveling. (Rates start at about \$119 for a single trip.) After she reached the company on a satellite phone, the staff arranged for his admission to a hospital in Addis Ababa, where he was stabilized, then secured a private plane to fly the couple to Nairobi, Kenya, for treatment by a neurosurgeon who consulted with Hopkins physicians. Global Rescue later arranged a commercial flight back home to Detroit accompanied by a paramedic for Mr. Searles, who has recovered well.

"Without them I don't know how I would have my husband with me today," says Ms. Searles. "If you are going to do this kind of travel at our age, it pays to take that extra step and think about getting rescued if need be."

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