



Seek the Latest Advice From Your Health Care Professional Before Travelling

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After months of staying at home because of COVID-19, many Canadians are keen to start planning their future travels. While we're likely to see new protocols introduced by airlines like pre-boarding screening, contactless check-ins, and wearing masks in transit, the focus on staying healthy hasn't changed. It remains a priority — even more so as awareness around the spread of the disease has increased.

While there will always be some risk of exposure to disease with travel, the

key is to take preventative steps. “Unless you're going to live in a bubble and never leave your home, you're exposing yourself to risk,” says Ajit Johal,

a pharmacist and Clinical Director of Vancouver-based TravelRx. “That's not going to change. People will just have to find ways to mitigate it.”

Reduce risk by being prepared

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Johal points out that people will want to be extra diligent once they start globe-trotting. “It's interesting because all government websites say, ‘See a health care provider before you take any trips abroad.’ Now that's going to happen much more,” he says. “Being prepared is not only crucial for travellers' health, but also for

our health care system at home. When people don't immunize themselves when they travel, they can become asymptomatic carriers and spread certain diseases at home when they return.”

Travellers taking international trips need to understand the importance of staying safe. “Over the last couple of years, I've seen more and more people electing to get vaccinated before they travel,” says Johal. “Vaccination is still the best public health intervention. I'm a huge proponent.”

That means making sure your immunizations are up to date and being diligent about general hygiene practices, from thorough handwashing — a skill many have perfected during the COVID-19 pandemic — to wiping down surfaces on airplanes and at hotels and restaurants with disinfectant. Johal also suggests travellers be careful about what they eat (boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it) and about preventing insect bites, especially from mosquitoes, which can carry a range of diseases.

When it comes to planning a trip, choose destinations carefully as countries are still grappling with COVID-19. “Ideally, you'll want to ensure that where you're headed has low infection and death rates,” notes Dr. Brian Aw, Medical Director at the Ultimate Health Medical Centre in Richmond Hill, ON. “It's irresponsible to go somewhere where cases are rising. And you'll also need to be aware of — and respect — local quarantine laws.”

Stay safe abroad through immunization

Preparing for a trip also means minimizing the chances of having any kind of medical intervention abroad, which may increase your risk of being infected in a hospital or clinic, Dr. Aw notes. “Given that COVID-19 can give a traveller multiple symptoms including fever, cough, shortness of breath and diarrhea, you want to avoid any comorbidity that could cause you to have serious complications from the virus,” he explains. So before you go, he recommends getting your flu shot, getting the necessary vaccinations for the areas visited, and taking measures to prevent traveller's diarrhea, an illness that affects 30 to 50 percent of travellers during a two-week trip overseas. As well, people planning trips should consider other vaccines available and appropriate to their health status.

The good news is that we will travel again. As both experts agree, exploring the world is possible to do safely by adopting risk-mitigating measures. In the meantime, look to reputable sites for credible information and consult a health care professional at least four to six weeks prior to departure to get the best and most up-to-date advice on best practices for staying healthy at home and abroad. ■

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