

Protecting the health of employees when traveling overseas

BY WILLIAM W. SPANGLER, M.D.

Traveling overseas offers its own challenges and risks when people become ill or suffer an accident. If employees are traveling domestically, they can ordinarily find a doctor in network to provide the right care, or an emergency department or adequate medical facility for evaluation and treatment.

But once your employees leave the United States, finding appropriate health care and dealing with medical emergencies can become quite difficult and extremely costly. Especially in Third World countries, getting the proper treatment in an expeditious fashion for an illness or injury can be a matter of life or death. Given this potentially dire situation, it's critical that your employees traveling overseas and your company's expatriates take medical precautions to protect their health as much as possible.

Advise your travelers to schedule a visit with their doctor at least a few weeks in advance of their trips to see if certain vaccinations are needed before visiting more remote parts of the world. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is recommended that visits be scheduled four to six weeks prior to a trip, as many vaccines take time to become effective and, in some instances, employees may need to be given a series of vaccinations over a period of days or sometimes weeks. Travelers can also go one step further and visit a travel immunization department of a local major hospital or clinic, if available.

Employees should visit the websites of both the CDC (www.cdc.gov) and the World Health Organization (www.who.org) to obtain information on what kinds of immunizations to get for different parts of the world, what diseases are prevalent, what epidemics may be on the rise, as well as valuable travel alerts.

Pack carefully

As a basic rule, advise your employees that all of their medications need to be packed in their carry-on bag and should be kept in their original container and be carefully labeled. I often hear from patients who check their medications, and then their baggage is lost or delayed, and they have to track down new prescriptions. I always tell patients to plan for the worst — international travelers who were recently stranded due to volcanic ash spewing in Iceland are an effective cautionary tale — and advise them to take extra medicine(s) for at least an additional week or more over what is required for their scheduled dates of travel.

Travelers and expatriates who will be overseas for an extended period should carry a complete list of all medications with both their brand name and generic name, as well as the required dosages. What often surprises travelers is the importance of knowing the generic names of their medications, since brand names can vary from country to country, while generic names tend to be consistent from one region of the world to another.

Employees who use injectable drugs should have a doctor's note with them, so that they don't have a problem bringing needles aboard an airplane. The same is true with any liquid medicines.

Advise employees to bring their doctors' telephone numbers with them, especially if a doctor overseas needs to consult with them on any health concerns that may arise. They should keep copies of medical records and doctor phone numbers back at home with family or friends. Employees with allergies, particularly those to different medications, should have a doctor's note describing the

medications in case they are unconscious or unable to speak.

Also advise your employees to carry telephone numbers of their travel assistance company with them at all times, in case of any emergency. One toll-free number can put them in touch with an English-speaking medical professional who can help lead them to the appropriate medical facilities in case of a health emergency or accident.

For minor injuries and mild ailments, employees may not know that their hotel concierge or general manager can be their best friend — especially in Westernized countries. Many hotels work regularly with local doctors who see guests in their rooms and even charge a reasonable amount for such visits. They may even be more skilled and professional than physicians at some local hospitals or clinics and are more likely to speak English. They also would be available any time of day or night.

Travelers should heed CDC and doctors' warnings about what foods to avoid or if they should only drink bottled water in a certain country. If drinking bottled water is recommended, employees should brush their teeth with bottled water as well. They also need to be reminded to avoid ice cubes, frosted drinks, and fresh fruits and vegetables that are washed in local tap water.

By following these tips, you can help ensure that your employees' health is protected while they are out of the country on business. **-E.B.N.**

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