Health tips for travellers

Nothing can spoil a holiday more than feeling off-colour, and nothing can dull the pleasure of your holiday memories more than getting ill far from home. There are a number of health issues that you should be aware of, particularly if you're from the northern hemisphere.

However, while there are risks anywhere, South Africa has a relatively salubrious climate and our levels of water treatment, hygiene and such make it a pretty safe destination.

Inoculations

If you're an adult, you won't need any inoculations unless you're travelling from a yellow-fever endemic area (the yellow fever belt of Africa or South America), in which case you will need certification to prove your inoculation status when you arrive in South Africa. It is recommended that you have the required inoculations four to six weeks before you travel to South Africa (a yellow fever inoculation certificate only becomes valid 10 days after inoculation - after which it remains valid for 10 years).

Hepatitis B inoculations are recommended for children up to the age of 12 who have not completed the series of injections as infants. Booster doses for tetanus and measles can also be administered.

Medical facilities

Medical facilities in cities and larger towns are world-class, but you will find that in rural areas the clinics and hospitals deal with primary health needs, and therefore do not offer the range of medical care that the large metropolitan hospitals do. Trained medical caregivers are deployed round the country, so help is never far away.

The sun

We have a warm sunny climate and you should wear sunscreen and a hat whenever you are out of doors during the day, particularly between 10am and 4pm, regardless of whether there is cloud cover or not. Even if you have a dark complexion, you can still get sunburned if you are from a cooler climate and have not had much exposure to the sun. Sunglasses are also recommended wear, as the glare of the African sun can be strong.

Can I drink the water?

High-quality tap (faucet) water is available almost everywhere in South Africa, treated so as to be free of harmful micro-organisms, and in any area other than informal or shack settlements, is both palatable and safe to drink straight from the tap. In some areas, the water is mineral-rich, and you may experience a bit of gastric distress for a day or two until you get used to it. Bottled mineral water, both sparkling and still, is readily available in most places.

Drinking water straight from rivers and streams could put you at risk of waterborne diseases – especially downstream of human settlements. The water in mountain streams, however, is usually pure and wonderful. In the Cape, particularly, the water contains humic acid, which stains it the colour of diluted Coca-Cola – this is absolutely harmless, and the water is wonderful. You may also find this colouring in tap water in some areas. It's fine – it just looks a bit weird in the bath.

Do I need to take malaria tablets?

Many of the main tourist areas are malaria-free, so you need not worry at all. However, the Kruger National Park, the Lowveld of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, and the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal do pose a malaria risk in the summer months. Many local people and some travellers do not take malaria prophylaxis, but most health professionals recommend you do. Consult your doctor or a specialist travel clinic for the latest advice concerning malaria prophylaxis, as it changes regularly.

Whether you take oral prophylaxis or not, always use mosquito repellent, wear long pants, closed shoes and light long-sleeved shirts at night, and sleep under a mosquito net in endemic areas (the anopheles mosquito, which carries malaria, operates almost exclusively after dark). It is advisable to avoid malarial areas if you are pregnant.

- More information: SAA Netcare Travel Clinics

HIV/Aids

As in other countries, always take precautions when having sex. South Africa has one of the highest rates of HIV in the world. For more information, see HIV/Aids in South Africa

Other health issues

Bilharzia can be a problem in some of the east-flowing rivers, but it is easily detected and treated if it is caught early. Perhaps it would be a good idea to have a routine test a month or two after you get home – just to reassure yourself. Ticks generally come out in the early spring and may carry tickbite fever, which is easily treated. You should also be aware of hepatitis, for which you can be inoculated.