

Traveler's Diarrhea

If you travel to a developing country, the risk of acquiring diarrhea from eating contaminated food or water is much higher than here in the United States. Most of the risk is from poor restaurant hygiene practices. All tap water should be assumed to be contaminated. Water can be purified by chemical means, or by boiling. Filtration works only if associated with a chemical method.

Ninety percent of traveler's diarrhea is due to bacteria that can be treated with an antibiotic. The sudden onset of relatively uncomfortable diarrhea is caused mainly by bacteria. If you experience sudden, uncomfortable diarrhea, you can take an antibiotic right away to shorten the illness to one day in most cases. These are the two most commonly used antibiotics:

- Ciprofloxacin 500mg—take one pill to start, and a second pill 8-12 hours later. This is the drug of choice for most destinations.
- Azithromycin 500mg—take 1 pill per day for 1 to 2 days. This drug is necessary in countries where the bacteria have become resistant to ciprofloxacin.

If your schedule requires traveling away from a toilet while experiencing diarrhea, you can take Imodium (loperamide) 2 mg. Imodium is available without prescription, and is taken as follows:

- Imodium 2 mg—take two pills to start, then one pill after each loose bowel movement until the bowel movements stop. This is usually achieved with 3-4 pills total. Do not exceed 8 pills in any 24 hour period.

Imodium can sometimes stop the bowels for longer than one wants, so it is prudent to reserve its use for situations involving travel away from a toilet. It is safe to use if taken along with an antibiotic.

On longer journeys it is possible to develop infections with other organisms, such as Giardia and amoebas. These organisms generally cause infections that start more gradually and are less severe, but longer lasting. A stool exam is often needed to make a clear diagnosis, but treatment can sometimes be based on symptoms alone.

Treatment for Giardia: Tinidazole 500 mg (four pills all at once each day for two days)

For further information read: The Health and Safety Section of Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya, published by Lonely Planet. Or visit the website of the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu: www.ciwec-clinic.com