To travel is to go from one place to another either by road, rail, air or sea. More people are travelling greater distances and at greater speeds than ever before. Whatever the reason to travel, it is important to consider that along with discovering new landscapes, there are a number of health risks associated with travelling to unfamiliar environments. The mode of transportation, destination and duration of stay, type of accommodation, activities planned during the trip as well as the underlying health of the traveller are factors that determine the risks the traveller may need to consider. The pharmacist’s assistant is ideally positioned to offer advice on over-the-counter (OTC) medication for travel as well as general travel health advice. The article is not intended to give individualised advice as some travellers may have pre-existing conditions, allergies or specific needs. For this reason, travellers must be encouraged to seek advice from their doctor or travel clinic at least one month before intended travel, especially if travelling out of South Africa.

Prevention is better than cure
Health risks associated with travelling can be minimised by taking precautions before leaving:

Vaccines
Vaccination is an effective method of preventing certain infectious diseases. Vaccines for travellers include:

• Basic vaccines as per routine vaccine schedules.
• Vaccines that may be advised before travel to countries or areas at risk of these diseases.
• Vaccines required by International Health Regulations.

It is important to seek advice from a travel clinic with details of your trip in order to be advised accordingly. Always allow at least one month before departure to consult with a travel doctor, not only to have time to complete the necessary vaccines but to allow enough time for these vaccines to be protective. The travel clinic will issue documentation which will serve as proof of vaccination. These documents must be kept safely and be accessible as they may be requested by airline or airport officials.

Don’t let the mosquitoes bite!
Travel to certain areas may increase the risk of diseases carried by mosquitoes such as malaria, dengue fever, chikungunya, Zika, yellow fever and other vector-borne diseases. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes by following the advice below:

• Avoid outdoor exposure during mosquito feeding time (for malaria, Japanese encephalitis, and West Nile virus, this is between dusk and dawn; for dengue, chikungunya, Zika, and yellow fever, this is during the daytime).
• Wear clothing that reduces the amount of exposed skin.
• Apply insect repellent containing N,N-Diethyl-meta-toluamide (DEET) to exposed skin; repeat as recommended on the label avoiding eyelids, lips, sunburnt or damaged skin. Do not use sprays on the face and follow the application directions carefully, especially in young children.
• Use mosquito mats, mosquito coils and mosquito-proof bed nets if possible.
• Ceiling fans and air conditioners are effective in keeping mosquitoes away.

Malaria risk
Malaria is an acute life-threatening illness transmitted by female Anopheles mosquitoes, which mainly bite between dusk and dawn. Because the risk of malaria varies from country to country and even between areas within a country, a travel clinic should be consulted to provide advice on the risk of malaria and the methods of prevention based on the level of risk. In addition, travellers should be educated on the “ABCD” of malaria:
• Be aware of the risk of malaria, that a delayed onset of symptoms is possible, and that the main symptoms may mimic flu e.g. fever, chills, headache, muscle pains.
• Avoid being bitten by mosquitoes, especially between dusk and dawn when taking antimalarial medication.
• Take antimalarial medicine (Chemoprophylaxis) when appropriate (as prescribed by the doctor), to prevent infection.
• Immediately seek diagnosis and treatment if a fever develops one week or up to three months after entering a malaria area.

The doctor at the travel clinic will be able to select the most suitable antimalarial medication specific to an individual and it is important to strictly take these as directed. Although no antimalarial medication affords complete protection, it can reduce the risk of fatal disease. The best way to prevent disease is to practise strict mosquito-bite prevention.

Food and water hygiene

Several infections such as diarrhoea, hepatitis A, typhoid fever, cholera (to name a few), can be contracted by eating contaminated food. In areas where sanitation and personal hygiene are poor, the risks for these infections are higher and food and water precautions are important to reduce the risk of these infections. Other than being vaccinated, the following precautions help reduce the risk of infection:
• Do not drink or brush your teeth with unboiled tap water.
• Do not drink beverages containing ice made from unboiled tap water.
• Be careful of water bottled in the country being visited, because the safety and boiling conditions there might not be adequate.
• Do not eat unpeeled fruit or raw vegetables.
• Do not consume unpasteurised dairy products.
• Do not eat raw or rare meat, fish or shellfish.

Travel health kit

A travel health kit should be carried by all travellers regardless of their destination, particularly if travelling internationally. The purpose of a travel kit is to manage pre-existing medical conditions, prevent illness and injury and to take care of minor ailments they may occur. This travel health kit is only useful if it is easily accessible. Therefore, it should be carried with the traveller at all times, although sharp objects like tweezers and scissors should be packed in luggage that is checked in. Any liquid or gel-based items must not exceed the size limitations set out by airlines.

Travelling with prescription medications

Ensure that prescription medicines are carried in their original packaging with the labelling clearly visible. Copies of valid prescriptions should also be carried. Travellers with pre-existing chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes, hypertension) should ensure they carry enough medication for the duration of the trip and an extra supply in the event of any unforeseen delays. Always consult the doctor if participating in any extreme sports or activities, as there may be a requirement for prescribed medication to prevent illnesses such as altitude sickness.

Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines

Travellers should be advised to take the following OTC medicine supply to manage minor ailments:
• Paracetamol, aspirin, ibuprofen (ensure that there are no contraindications to their use) for pain and fever.
• Treatment for an upset stomach, such as an antacid; loperamide or diosmectite for diarrhoea; rehydration salts for dehydration and a mild laxative.
• Medication for motion sickness (cyclizine, cinnarizine).
• Oral decongestant, with or without an antihistamine, for upper respiratory ailments, such as a cold.
• Decongestant or saline nasal spray or drops for a blocked nose.
• Oral antihistamine for an allergic reaction.
• Insect repellent containing DEET for protection against mosquito and other insect bites.
• Sunscreen which has both ultraviolet A and ultraviolet B protection, and sun protection factor 15 or greater.
• After-sun or a preparation to treat sunburn and other burns or scalds.

Basic first aid items

• Antiseptic wound cleanser, cotton swabs, plasters.
• Antifungal and antibacterial topical preparations.
• Topical preparations for bites and stings containing aluminium sulphate or 0.5%–1% hydrocortisone cream (which will also assist with skin inflammation and itching).
• Antibacterial hand wipes or an alcohol-based hand sanitiser, containing ≥ 60% alcohol.

Conclusion

There are many health risk factors to consider before travelling, especially if travelling abroad. Emphasis should be placed on encouraging travellers to consult their doctor or travel clinic at least one month before departure. Carrying a selection of OTC medicines and first aid supplies could help to reduce the inconvenience of conditions such as motion sickness, diarrhoea, and minor ailments while travelling. The pharmacist’s assistant is well-placed to guide and educate travellers to be well prepared for their journey.

Bibliography

7. MIMS. OTC 2016.