

Traveler's health guide: gastrointestinal (GI) illness prevention

Travel and GI illness

GI illnesses are commonly acquired during travel to developing countries with poor sanitation systems or tropical areas like Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. It is important to follow precautions when traveling to prevent a GI infection:

- Drink only packaged, purified, or boiled water
- Avoid drinks containing ice
- Avoid eating uncooked vegetables or salads
- Avoid eating fruit you did not peel yourself
- Avoid unpasteurized milk and dairy products
- Wash produce with safe water before you eat it
- Wash hands before you eat or prepare food and after you use the bathroom or handle human or animal fecal waste (poop)



Types of GI illness

Many germs (bacteria, virus, and parasites) can contaminate food and water sources. You may be exposed to these during travel.

Common germs that cause GI illness include:

- E. coli (Escherichia coli)
- Campylobacter
- Shigella
- Salmonella
- Rotavirus
- Giardia
- Entamoeba histolytica
- Cryptosporidium
- Cyclospora

Common signs and symptoms

Symptom onset ranges between a few hours after infection to 1–2 weeks. Symptoms usually last 2–7 days without treatment. Some infections may persist for weeks or months if not treated. Common symptoms include:

- Weight loss
- Abdominal tenderness or cramps
- Fever
- Nausea
- Loose stools
- Bloody diarrhea



Water safety for travelling

If you plan to travel to a country with poor sanitation, it is very important to make sure the water sources utilized are safe and clean to best prevent a waterborne illness. Safe sources of drinking water include:

- Bottled water with an unbroken seal
- Tap water that has been boiled for at least 1 minute
- Carbonated water or beverage (i.e., soda) from a sealed can or bottle



If tap water is the only available water source, filtering through an absolute 1 micron or less filter (found at camping/outdoor stores) and dissolving chlorine, chlorine dioxide, or iodine tablets in the filtered water can help ensure safe drinking water. Be cautious about drinking (or brushing teeth, etc.) fountain drinks, drinks with ice, or drinks from open containers or from a tap that hasn't been treated properly with filtration and/or chlorination/iodination.

Water treatments and their uses



Water treatment	Bacteria (i.e., Campylobacter, Salmonella)	Viruses (i.e., Norovirus)	Parasites (Giardia)	Parasites (Cryptosporidium)
Boil (For 1 min, or 3 minutes if above 6,500 ft)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Filter	✓	✗	✓	✓
Purifier	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chlorine treatment (Disinfectant)	✓	✓	!	!
Iodine (Disinfectant)	✓	✓	✗	✗

- ✓ **Effective**—will remove or kill this type of pathogen
- ! **Somewhat effective**— may remove some of this pathogen, but water could still be contaminated
- ✗ **Not effective**—will not remove or kill this pathogen