

Traveler's Diarrhea

What causes traveler's diarrhea?

People get traveler's diarrhea by eating food and drinking water that contain germs. People can get this illness in areas of the world where drinking water is not clean.

Cooks and food handlers may have on their hands the germs that cause traveler's diarrhea, but they may not get sick themselves. In the same way, people who live in a place often drink tap water that contains these germs, but they do not get diarrhea. This is because their bodies are used to the germs. When people travel to a new place, they are more likely to become sick, because they lack protective antibodies (infection-fighting agents in the blood) that attack these germs.

How can I avoid traveler's diarrhea?

When you are visiting an area where the water may not be clean, you should be careful about these things:

- Do not drink tap water and do not use it to brush your teeth.
- Do not drink bottled water if the seal on the bottle has been broken.
- Do not use ice that has been made from tap water.
- Do not drink milk or eat dairy products that have not been pasteurized (heated to a temperature where all germs are killed).
- Do not eat raw fruits or vegetables unless they can be peeled and you are the one who peels them.
- Do not eat lettuce and other leafy raw vegetables (like spinach), and do not eat cut-up fruit salad.
- Do not eat raw or rare (slightly cooked) meat or fish.
- Do not eat food from people who sell food on the street.

What is safe to eat or drink?

When you are in a place where you could get traveler's diarrhea, you can feel safe eating or drinking the following:

- Soft drinks that are carbonated (drinks with a gas called carbon dioxide in them).
- Hot drinks, such as tea or coffee.
- Carbonated or noncarbonated bottled water as long as you are the one who breaks the seal on the bottle.
- Raw fruits or vegetables that can be peeled, as long as you are the one who peels them.
- Food that is served hot.
- Meat that is well cooked.

If I get traveler's diarrhea, what should I drink?

If you get traveler's diarrhea, you need to replace the fluid you lose by drinking a rehydrating solution. If you cannot find a rehydrating solution, you should drink fruit juices, caffeine-free soft drinks or bottled water, and you should eat salted crackers.

Should I use medicine to treat traveler's diarrhea?

Medicines you get from your doctor, such as diphenoxylate with atropine (brand name: Lomotil), and medicines you can buy in a drugstore, such as loperamide (brand names: Imodium, Kaopectate, Maalox) or bismuth subsalicylate (brand name: Pepto-Bismol), often can make you feel better more quickly. You may also need antibiotics (medicines that kill bacteria). Medicines can be very helpful if you have diarrhea 3 or more times in less than 8 hours, and if you also have other problems, such as cramping, fever or blood in your stools (bowel movements). Before you go on a trip, ask your doctor what medicines to take if you get diarrhea.

While I am on my trip, should I take medicine every day so I won't get diarrhea?

Not usually. But you may want to talk about this with your doctor before you go on your trip. You may want to take an antibiotic every day if you will be on your trip for less than 2 weeks and if you have kidney disease, cancer, diabetes, AIDS or an illness that affects the digestive system.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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