

Traveler's FAQ About Influenza

What is my risk for acquiring influenza infection during my travels?

The risk of exposure to influenza during travel depends on the time of year, destinations, and type of travel (for example, large, organized tourist groups). In the tropics, influenza can occur throughout the year. In temperate regions of the Southern Hemisphere, most influenza activity occurs from April through September. In the Northern Hemisphere, influenza generally occurs from November through March. However, in temperate climate zones of both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, travelers can be exposed to influenza during their respective summer months, especially when traveling in large, organized tourist groups consisting of persons from areas of the world where influenza viruses are circulating.

Should I cancel my travel plans if there are reports of influenza where I am going?

CDC does not recommend canceling travel plans. Most travelers will not develop a febrile respiratory illness during their travels. No special prevention measures are recommended at this time for travelers who are younger than 50 years of age and in good health, because their risk for serious complications from influenza is very low.

However persons aged 6 months or older with chronic medical conditions and unvaccinated persons aged 50 years or older should receive influenza vaccine. They also should consult their physicians prior to travel regarding the signs and symptoms of influenza and the advisability of carrying antiviral medications for prevention of influenza if influenza-like illness occurs in their travel group.

Should I receive influenza vaccine before traveling? If I can't, what are my alternatives?

Persons at risk for complications of influenza should consider receiving influenza vaccine before travel, provided it is available, if they were not vaccinated with influenza vaccine during the preceding fall or winter, and if they plan to:

- travel to the tropics;
- travel with large, organized tourist groups at any time of year;
- travel to the southern Hemisphere from April through September.

No information is available regarding the benefits of revaccinating before summer travel persons who were already vaccinated the preceding fall or winter.

Influenza vaccine usually is available in the United States beginning in September each year, but might be more difficult to find after December. Vaccinations should be administered at least 2 weeks before planned travel, to allow sufficient time to develop protective immunity. Persons at risk for influenza-related complications should be vaccinated each fall or winter.

When the vaccine supply is limited, the prescription antiviral medications amantadine and rimandine can play an important role in the prevention and treatment of influenza A, while neuraminidase inhibitors zanamivir and oseltamivir play an important role in the treatment of influenza A and B. Oseltamivir is also approved for prophylaxis of influenza A and B. Travlers should consult their health care providers regarding the advisability of carrying appropriate antiviral medications during travel.

What if I develop a respiratory illness during my trip?

If you develop symptoms of respiratory illness, such as cough, sore throat, or fever, while you are traveling, you should contact your tour director, hotel staff, guide, or physician. As with any illness, if you feel that you are having difficulty breathing, you should consult a physician and seek immediate medical attention. Travel personnel or hotel staff are likely to have information on local medical facilities should you require them.

You should limit your exposure to others if you have symptoms such as cough, sore throat, or fever. This could mean avoiding activities or places (including those on cruise ships) where people are crowded together indoors, such as restaurants, bars, movie theaters, or game rooms.

If a physician diagnoses you with influenza and it has been less than 2 days since the onset of symptoms, antiviral medications might help to lessen your symptoms. These medications must be prescribed by a physician who is in charge of reviewing your medical history.

What if I develop respiratory symptoms after I return home?

If you develop cold or influenza symptoms within one week of returning home and you are sick enough to see a physician, please do so. Your physician might choose to test you for influenza. If you have been sick for less than 2 days, your physician might consider prescribing antiviral medications.

What is the travel industry doing to limit influenza transmission among tourists?

The travel industry is working closely with public health authorities. Some cruise lines have started surveillance for respiratory illness among both passengers and crew members. Also, some cruise lines vaccinate their crew members against influenza.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention