

Healthy Travel for Lunar New Year

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Amanda] February 7, 2008, will begin a new year on the Chinese calendar - the Year of the Rat. During this time, traveling to visit family and friends has become as much a tradition as red lanterns and firecrackers. This is Amanda Whatley and I am speaking with Dr. Phyllis Kozarsky to learn more about healthy travel during this exciting time of year. She is a travel health specialist with the CDC's Division of Global Migration and Quarantine. Dr. Kozarsky, thanks for joining us.

[Dr. Kozarsky] My pleasure.

[Amanda] Many people are planning travel to Asia for Lunar New Year celebrations. What health issues should these travelers be aware of?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Well, each destination will be a little different, however, there are some diseases that I want our listeners to know about. Mosquito-borne diseases, such as malaria, Japanese encephalitis (JE), and dengue fever are common throughout Asia. Be sure to take steps to avoid mosquito bites by sleeping in rooms with window screens or under mosquito nets; using an insect repellent containing DEET or Picaridin on exposed skin; wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts when going outside; and, if possible, avoiding areas with stagnant water. There are also medicines available that prevent malaria and a vaccine available to prevent Japanese encephalitis. If your destination has a risk of either of these diseases, talk to your doctor or travel medicine specialist about prevention options for you and your family.

Another disease traveler's should be aware of is traveler's diarrhea, which is caused by consuming contaminated food or beverages, including water and ice. While this illness is usually not dangerous, you can reduce your risk by eating foods that are freshly cooked and served piping hot, and by drinking beverages that are bottled and sealed or carbonated. Avoid raw or undercooked meat or seafood.

Finally, one of the most common diseases that people can get while traveling is seasonal influenza. The best way to protect yourself is by getting the flu vaccine at least 2 weeks before your trip, if you're not already vaccinated.

You can learn more about these diseases and their symptoms, as well as get information specific to your destination, by going to www.cdc.gov/travel.

[Amanda] Dr. Kozarsky, I've seen on the news that some people in Asia have been getting sick with bird flu; some have even died. What is this disease?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Bird flu is very different from the yearly influenza that people get in winter months. There are actually many strains of bird flu, and most of them only infect birds.

However, one particular strain, called H5N1, has infected both birds and some people. H5N1 has been detected in wild birds and poultry in many countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This virus kills almost all birds that become infected. The virus is still rare in people, with only about 350 human cases reported, worldwide, since 2003.

[Amanda] So if I'm traveling to Asia, should I be worried about getting bird flu?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Currently, bird flu infections in people have occurred mostly after exposure to sick birds or poultry. Some people have become infected through close contact with another infected person, but this is very rare. While bird flu can be a dangerous disease, travelers who take simple precautions don't need to worry. Learn as much as you can about bird flu in your destination, and follow all CDC recommendations to avoid exposure.

[Amanda] What are these recommendations? How can travelers protect themselves?

[Dr. Kozarsky] People should avoid going to bird farms or live bird markets while in Asia. Don't touch live, sick, or dead birds, or any surfaces that have bird feces, blood, or other body fluids on them. Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel if soap and water aren't available. Cover your mouth and nose when you cough, and be sure to wash your hands afterwards.

[Amanda] That's great advice. Ok, so now travelers know not to touch birds, but what if they want to eat chicken or duck. Is this safe?

[Dr. Kozarsky] That's a great question, Amanda. It's entirely safe to eat these meats if they're cooked properly. Travelers need to make sure that all meat and other foods from birds, like eggs and poultry blood, are fully cooked. Egg yolks should not be runny or liquid. When making food, keep raw meats away from other foods. After touching raw poultry or eggs, wash your hands and all surfaces, dishes, and utensils thoroughly with soap and water.

[Amanda] Great. Aside from bird flu, do you have any other advice for travelers?

[Dr. Kozarsky] As I mentioned before, travelers should learn as much as possible about the health risks in their destination BEFORE travel. Every destination has different health issues that travelers need to know about. The best advice is to visit www.cdc.gov/travel and read about the health risks in your destination and how to protect you and your family. In addition, there are some general precautions that all travelers should keep in mind.

[Amanda] What are these precautions?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Well, one of the most basic travel health precautions...and this goes for general health as well...is to practice good hand hygiene. Remember to always wash your hands thoroughly before eating and preparing food. Food-borne illnesses are

common among international travelers and result from eating and drinking contaminated food and beverages. Another risk to be aware of are injuries, which are the leading cause of preventable death among travelers.

[Amanda] Wow, I didn't realize that. What is the source of all these injuries?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Road traffic injuries are the most common and are the leading cause of injury-related deaths, worldwide. Travelers should always wear a safety belt in a moving vehicle when available, ride in marked taxis, and use caution when crossing the street. If you're traveling in a developing country, don't drive at night.

[Amanda] I would also like take this opportunity to remind our listeners that it is NEVER safe to drink and drive. Whether you are abroad or at home, don't attempt to drive after drinking alcohol and never get in a car if the driver has been drinking alcohol. Now, changing gears a bit, we know that several families will be traveling during the holiday. How can parents keep their children safe and healthy?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Parents should be aware that all the health risks we've been talking about apply to children, as well as adults. Diarrhea is a very common ailment that affects children. Parents should frequently wash toys and any other objects that their child may put in his or her mouth. Encourage good hand hygiene in children. Parents may want to bring along a health kit for their children, including alcohol-based hand sanitizer and any medications their child may need.

[Amanda] Well, this has been very helpful. Do you have any final words of wisdom for our travelers?

[Dr. Kozarsky] Make an appointment to see a travel medicine specialist or healthcare provider familiar with giving travel advice BEFORE you leave, preferably 4-6 weeks before you leave. If you are leaving in less than 4 weeks, you should still see a healthcare provider before travel. During the appointment, tell the doctor where you will be traveling and ask about precautions that you should take and any medicines or shots that you need. Be sure that you're up-to-date on all your routine vaccinations, including a seasonal flu shot. Also, ask the doctor about additional safety measures to take while traveling with children. And finally, please enjoy your trip!

[Amanda] Dr. Kozarsky, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. You have given our listeners some great information about traveling safely during this time of year. On behalf of Dr. Kozarsky and the rest of CDC's Travelers' Health Team, we wish you a happy, prosperous, and HEALTHY New Year!

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.