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The Vaccine People

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PASSPORT HEALTH IS THE FIRST STOP

By: John Slaughter

Author: Brother in the Bush

A powerful memoir about how travel through Africa transforms the life of a successful African American professional. Portions of the book are devoted to the pre-travel counseling and immunizations he received prior to travel.

When my friend Mike said, "I'd love to go to East Africa with you", I was shocked. I'd been trying to get my best friend to join me on the photo safaris I had been leading for almost ten years. Each time I'd ask, there was always something or some reason why he responded, "I can't go this year."

When Mike's father, a pastor, died late last year, a new person emerged. Was he really new, or was a new honesty looking back at him in the mirror? I didn't ask. I think something happens to all of us when we look mortality in the face. We start taking measure of our lives and the life we want to live. Long ago, I said we live two lives: there is the life we plan and the life we live. Mike was tired of planning to live, he was simply – ready to live.

However, there was one small problem. "John, the only reason why I didn't join you years ago," he said, his voice a whisper, "is the shots. I don't wanna take all those shots."

OK! Now it all made sense. Mike didn't want to go to East Africa and witness for himself the stories I've been telling about the people and the wonderful food we enjoyed everyday. No. Mike wasn't adverse to experiencing life in the Garden of Eden, photographing the animals up-close and food being pulled from the ground, moments before it was prepared and placed on our plates. No. Mike wasn't adverse to camping out in the Serengeti. He equally enjoyed out-door cooking and

a rusty-dusty game drive, criss-crossing a landscape where one can see 50 miles in every direction. No. Mike's concern was about being stuck. And he's not alone. "When you told me about all the shots you took, I convinced myself I wasn't leaving home," he confided.

"But Mike," I reasoned. "My first trip to East Africa was done in a hurry. Most people plan a year in advance for such a major excursion. If you were going to join me in 2006, I'd have you on a training and medical educational program – now!"

"Of course, there are shots that need to be taken. The CDC makes recommendations for travel outside of the United States. Destination countries often have vaccine requirements prior to entry. Yellow Fever is required, however, for your health, you should consider protecting yourself from many more diseases that simply haven't found their way across the continents and a major ocean like the Atlantic."

When I shared he could break his selected vaccinations into small, less stressful trips to Passport Health, he was visibly relieved. "Tell you what," I began, a strand of a plan taking shape in my mind, "we've establish a bi-monthly training schedule. Two times a month, we'll travel to Passport Health and will educate you about the medical and environmental conditions you will be facing and the precautions you can take in advance. We'll take no more than ▶ 3

TRAVELING WITH FOOD ALLERGIES

One of the great pleasures of traveling in a foreign country is the opportunity to sample the local cuisine. But for anyone with a food allergy or sensitivity, dining in a foreign country can be an uncertain or, at worst, dangerous proposition.

According to the Food Allergy Initiative (FAI) more than 11 million Americans have food allergies of varying degrees of severity. Each year over 30,000 people in the United States seek emergency hospitalization for food-induced anaphylaxis – a life-threatening allergic reaction. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases division of the National Institutes of Health estimates the number of people with Celiac Disease (grain intolerance) at 2 million. Their 1994 lactose intolerance (milk intolerance) study estimates that 30 to 50 million people are afflicted with the inability to digest dairy products. Symptoms of food allergies can range from a mildly upset stomach or headache to hives, shortness of breath or in the most severe cases anaphylactic shock.

These medical conditions affect millions of people, many of whom are traveling in countries where they don't speak the language. The following information provides an overview of the challenges these travelers face.

Restaurants & Menus

Foreign restaurants vary in their awareness of and sensitivity to individuals with food allergies. To a large degree this is determined by a country's educational level, government policies and cultural diet. For a traveler with food allergies the single most serious obstacle is language. ▶ 2



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WHEN JET LAG THREATENS TO GROUND YOU, OUTDISTANCE IT

By: Larry G. Baratta, M.D., Ph.D.

President/CEO, Passport Health of Coral Gables, Hollywood and Boca Raton, Florida

One of the most mysterious and arcane topics among airplane travelers is jet lag and its incapacitating effects. Having firsthand experience, from traveling frequently over a six-year period from New York to numerous destinations in Asia, I know jet lag to be a debilitating experience that can be dealt with effectively by understanding a few principles.

I can vividly remember flying 14 hours nonstop from JFK to Tokyo, having a four-hour layover and catching a 5 1/2-hour nonstop flight to Manila. That common air-travel route took me through the International Date Line and 12 time zones.

My body went through a cavalcade of symptoms, including severe fatigue, slight disorientation, irritability and a greatly disturbed sleep pattern. In fact, when I arrived in Manila at 11 p.m., and two days later, I was still wide-awake and could not go to sleep. My body's clock was set to Eastern Standard Time, and it was really 11 a.m.

The body has naturally occurring rhythms that keep us awake during the day and sleeping at night. The rhythms that cause us to do that are called circadian rhythms, they control the body's biological clock. Circadian rhythms are physiological and behavioral characteristics that follow a daily, or circadian, pattern.

Jet lag is a severe disruption of circadian rhythms brought about by time-zone changes; a dry cabin atmosphere and changes in cabin pressure; alcohol consumption and a lack of exercise during the flight.

Time-zone changes seem to be the main contributor to jet lag. Traveling in an easterly direction has worse effects. Generally, adults who easily adjust to changes in their routine experience less jet-lag effects than those on a more fixed daily schedule. The cabin environment plays an important role, and air quality aboard jets tends to be dry.

For individuals residing in more humid climates, the change can be significant. A dry aircraft environment is known to cause drying of the mucosal tissue in the nose, mouth and throat and can also cause headaches.

The best suggestion to remember on any flight, short or long, is to drink plenty of water. Keep oral and nasal tissues and membranes well hydrated. There are over-the-counter saline nasal sprays that help keep membranes moist.

One of the most challenging aspects of long-haul flight is lack of exercise.

The Journal of Travel Medicine recently dedicated an article to the benefits of in-flight exercise and the incidence of deep vein thrombosis, which is the development of blood clots in the lower legs. The conclusions confirmed the benefits of in-seat exercises which prevented cramping and improved circulation in the legs. ■

TRAVELING WITH FOOD ALLERGIES

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Larger, more well established tourist-friendly restaurants are more likely to have English-speaking staff, as are restaurants in major metropolitan areas. Restaurants outside the tourist centers may not have a staff fluent in English. And menus typically do not have English translations. For this, a foreign language dictionary can help translate simple food words but is not helpful in communicating which foods to avoid – which is the primary concern of a traveler with food allergies.

Airlines

The majority of international air carriers provide special meals if you notify them in advance. Some offer an extensive variety of meals and have gone to great lengths to satisfy personal needs in this area. For example, Continental Airlines and EL AL list detailed menu plans on their websites. Air India, JAL and Korean Air have extensive lists of optional meals. Most of the special meals are focused on religious, diabetic, vegetarian or dietary plans like low fat or low-cholesterol. Some mention lactose-free and gluten-free meals. However, there are very few references to highly toxic foods such as nuts, peanuts and shellfish.

Food labels

Reading food labels is a must for people with food allergies. But this can be very difficult to do in a foreign language. In addition to different languages, countries have different food labeling laws that can provide more, less or confusing information. Some countries are required to list nearly all ingredients (as in the United States), some list only the major items (as in the EU), and some countries are not required to list any ingredients on a product label.

Cross Contamination

Cross-contamination in food preparation facilities and restaurants is not uncommon. It's easy to understand how commonly prepared foods might share the same pot or skillet in a busy restaurant. Cross-contamination mainly occurs in three ways: "food-to-food" - touching or dripping, "food-to-hand" - handling by the kitchen staff, waiter or market vendor, "food-to-equipment" – in preparation of a meal with pots and pans. The best way to address this issue to make sure the person serving the food clearly understands one's dietary restrictions.

A Simple Solution - SelectWisely

To help address these issues, a new company has been formed to bridge the communication gap. **SelectWisely** provides individuals with food allergies, food restrictions or food sensitivities a simple tool to help them select the foods they want - and the foods they want to avoid. The company offers wallet-sized laminated cards that contain simple translations relating to specific foods. When individuals visit the SelectWisely web site, they can select the language of the country they intend to visit and the food or foods they are allergic to. SelectWisely takes the order and creates heavily laminated, plastic cards personalized just for them. All the cards have simple phrases translated into single or multiple languages.

Currently SelectWisely offers cards in 15 different languages and over 40 different foods. Cards are also available for vegetarians, those who are lactose intolerant and those on Gluten-free (grain intolerance) diets. Special orders can be accommodated for individuals traveling to more exotic countries or with allergies to multiple foods.

For more information, visit www.selectwisely.com ■

THE DIABETIC TRAVELER

By: Debbie Medellin, Executive Director, Passport Health Houston, Texas

Diabetes does not need to be an impediment to traveling the world. Most diabetics understand their bodies and how they react to different situations, better than most people. While it does make travel more complicated, there is absolutely no reason to stay home. With adequate preparation and using common sense, travel and diabetes can be very compatible.

Understanding and anticipating common health problems in both tropical and temperate climates, and being able to manage them on your own, will greatly add to a successful and enjoyable trip. Leaving without adequate preparation can only lead to problems and excess caution might keep you from enjoying "the trip of a lifetime". Finding a balance somewhere in-between is the answer.

Start by visiting your physician about 2 months before your trip. You will need to have a signed letter on your doctor's official letterhead, stating that you are a diabetic and are carrying syringes/medication necessary for your daily care. This will eliminate problems in customs areas both here and abroad. It is also a good idea to carry a summary of your medical history, and include a list of all medications with dosages. A medic alert bracelet or some other form of identification is essential. You will need to carry double the amount of medication and insulin that you normally use. It can be difficult, if not impossi-

ble to find your exact insulin in a foreign country. You will also need to double the amount of testing strips, since you will need to test more frequently. An empty plastic bottle serves well as a container to use for syringe and bloody strip disposal. Rapid or short acting insulin (e.g. Humalog) is a good idea to have on hand for emergencies, even if it is not part of your normal routine. Type I diabetics need to carry glucagon, and all diabetics should have glucose tablets or gels with them at all times. These products are easy to carry and store.

After seeing your physician to assess your fitness to travel, it is time to find a Travel Medicine specialist to prepare you for the specifics of travel. You will want to do this no later than 6-8 weeks before travel. Your travel medicine specialist should focus on six main areas: (1) pre-travel immunizations specifically indicated for your destination; (2) prevention of malaria; (3) prevention and self treatment of traveler's diarrhea (especially important for diabetics) including sugar-free electrolyte replacement solution; (4) a complete briefing on those health issues not vaccine preventable; (5) products that can provide safe water, reduce your exposure to insect bites, compression hose for long flights, are among the many product items that should be addressed; and (6) health insurance for foreign travel, that also provides

for emergency evacuation.

Some additional tips are:

- ❖ If you take pills to control blood sugar, no time zone adjustment is necessary while flying. Adjust your medication to the local time when reaching your destination.
- ❖ If traveling by airliner, call at least 72 hours before flying to order diabetic meals.
- ❖ Hand carry your insulin at all times.
- ❖ Consider carrying your insulin in a specially designed pack to insulate it. Insulin is generally stable even if it's not refrigerated, but it should be kept below 86 degrees.
- ❖ Test blood glucose level at six-hour intervals or before each meal while in-flight.

I have been an insulin dependent diabetic for 20 years. I have also traveled the globe without incident. It takes extra planning and care, but it is worth it. There's a glorious world out there just waiting to be discovered. With the help of your doctor, and your Passport Health travel specialist, there is no reason why you can't start right now to explore! ■

READER COMMENTS

Jennifer Chilton traveled throughout Southeast Asia. "You can count on finding cyber cafes almost everywhere. The soft side first aid kit and package of antiseptic towelettes I bought at Passport Health came in very handy—a must for travelers."

On a recent trip to Indonesia, Paul Opitz laid his jacket down while working. Red ants quickly found their way to Paul's jacket and hid in the collar. He was severely bitten about the neck and required medical attention. Paul suggests checking your garments before putting them on. ■

FIRST STOP

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one or two shots per visit, and the staff at Passport Health will share videos, reading materials and answer any questions that might come to mind since your last visit." Mike's eyes brightened at this idea. Not only was it a novel and different approach from the typical HMO experience, but also I could tell Mike started to feel comfortable with the idea of traveling to Tanzania. He was no longer whispering!

The author, Dr. John Slaughter just published a memoir: *Brother In the Bush: An*

African American's Search for Self in East Africa. Published by Agate Publishing, Chicago, this collection of essays has a wonderfully funny chapter: Under The Stars about John's first trip to East Africa and the valuable lessons he learned from Fran Lessans and Passport Health. If you are interested in joining Johnny on a photo safari or purchasing an autographed copy, go online to: www.brotherinthebush.com. *Brother In the Bush* can be purchased at major bookstores nationwide. ■



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Q. What are the worst areas for Rabies?

A. Although any mammal can carry rabies, it is more readily found in third-world countries. Most third world countries have many rabid dogs, monkeys, rodents, and bats. However, Thailand and Nepal are particularly bad. Large packs of rabid dogs run loose in Thailand, while the Monkey Palace of Nepal is infested with rabid dogs and monkeys.

Q. I am going to Asia this summer and I am concerned about the avian flu outbreaks. Since there is no vaccine available what precautions do you recommend?

A. Monitor the situation closely and seek prompt medical attention for any fever or illness following your travel to Southeast Asia. Avoid live poultry farms and public markets with live chickens or ducks. Some birds, espe-

cially ducks, can efficiently transmit the virus without appearing sick. Avoid bird and other animal excrement at areas including farms, parks and golf courses. Eat only well-cooked meals served hot, as heat destroys the virus. Get a flu shot prior to travel. Although the vaccine will not protect against avian influenza, it will protect against more common strains of influenza that are circulating. Always practice good hand hygiene. If you touch raw or frozen poultry during the food preparation process, carefully wash your hands and clean all kitchen surfaces with disinfectant. Try to eat in establishments with good food handling practices. Avoid traveling with fever, as authorities in many Asian destinations are screening travelers arriving from bird flu-affected countries for fever and cough.

Q. I have heard that vaccines contain mercury and this is harmful. Can you address this?

A. The FDA has been actively addressing the issue of thimerosal as a preservative in vaccines. Under the FDA Modernization Act of 1997, the FDA conducted a comprehensive review of the use of thimerosal in childhood vaccines. The review found no evidence of harm from the use of thimerosal as a vaccine preservative, other than local hypersensitivity reactions. In spite of these findings, manufacturers have removed thimerosal from most vaccines and continue to produce preservative free vaccines.

Q. Is there any way to tell if a bathroom mirror is a 2-way mirror? I was suspicious of a mirror in a woman's dressing room in a spa.

A. There have been many cases of people installing 2-way mirrors in female changing rooms. It is very difficult to positively identify the surface by just looking at it. You can conduct a simple test by placing the tip of your fingernail against the reflective surface and if there is a GAP between your fingernail and the image of the nail, then it is a genuine mirror. However, if your fingernail directly touches the image of your nail, then beware, for it is a 2-way mirror. If there is no space—leave.

Q. I am traveling to Mexico for three weeks; do I need Typhoid vaccination?

A. The CDC suggests typhoid fever vaccination even if you plan to stay for only a few weeks. Vaccination is an important means of preventing typhoid fever, which is spread largely through contaminated food and water. Nearly three-quarters of the reported cases of typhoid fever were associated with travel. Seventy-six percent of travel-related cases were among travelers to six countries—India—30%, Pakistan—13%, Mexico—12%, Bangladesh—8%, the Philippines—8% and Haiti—5%, just to mention a few. More than a quarter of infected travelers had stayed abroad no more than three weeks, and 60% stayed six weeks or less. Typhoid fever vaccination is safe and effective.