



Experiencing cultural diversity in foods and beverages when we travel abroad and within the United States is an exciting part of visiting other areas. But the physical discomfort that results from eating food or drinking beverages that might be contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites can spoil our travel plans. Knowing how to make safe food choices and following proper personal hygiene practices can help reduce the risk of getting sick when traveling.

What Is Foodborne Illness?

Foodborne illnesses, sometimes referred to as food poisoning, are defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as illness that results from eating or drinking contaminated food or beverages. Symptoms can occur within minutes to weeks from consumption and may include symptoms like nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or fever.

Foodborne diseases are a problem across the globe. Contamination of food can occur at any point in the food system including production, processing, transportation, storage, and preparation. Low- and middle-income countries, however, have the greatest number of incidents. People with compromised immune systems including infants and children, older adults, pregnant women, and persons with chronic diseases are at higher risk of getting a foodborne illness and should take extra precaution.

Preventing Foodborne Illness

Your first line of defense is to always wash your hands with soap and water before preparing or eating food. Research shows that you need to scrub your hands for 20 seconds to remove harmful substances, paying close attention to under fingernails and between fingers. If soap and water are not available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol is an appropriate substitute.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides the following recommendations to reduce the risk of developing a foodborne illness while you are traveling.

- Avoid lukewarm food. Cold food should be served cold, and hot food should be served hot. Bacteria that can cause foodborne illness grows in the temperature danger zone, between 40 degrees and 140 degrees F.
- Avoid uncooked food including salsas, salads, fresh condiments, fruits, and vegetables as they may

have been rinsed with unclean water. Fruits or vegetables that you can peel are safer options, especially if you can rinse them first with bottled water. Avoid fruits with damaged skins. Cook it, peel it, or leave it, is a good rule to follow.

- Avoid dishes containing raw or undercooked eggs.
- Avoid food from street vendors. If you choose to eat from a street vendor, take extra precautions.
- Do not eat seafood unless you are certain it is safe. Get advice from locals about the presence of poisonous biotoxins in some species of fish.
- Pasteurized milk in a sealed bottle is usually safe. Milk should be served chilled. Avoid milk, including cream for coffee or tea, that has been sitting at room temperature. Unpasteurized foods, including dairy and freshly squeezed fruit juice, carry risk for everyone, but especially those with weakened immune systems. If you are unsure, do not drink it.
- Boil or treat drinking water if you are doubtful about its safety. Choose bottled water or beverages when possible. Clean the outside of the bottle or can before opening to avoid contamination.
 - Do not drink coffee or tea that is served at room temperature or warm.
 - Be cautious with adding potentially contaminated things to your drink like cream or lemon. Sugar should be OK because it is a dry food.
 - Be careful with ice in drinks because it could have been made with contaminated water. Do not use ice in locations with limited access to clean water. Alcohol does not kill the bacteria from contaminated ice.
 - Fountain drinks like soda and beverages dispensed from a machine may be unsafe as the water is piped into the dispenser.

Sanitizers can help reduce the number of germs on hands but do not get rid of all types of germs. When hands are visibly dirty, sanitizers may not be as effective. When you can, wash hands with soap and water.

How to Properly Use Hand Sanitizer:

- Put sanitizer in one palm. Read label of product to learn the correct amount.
- Rub your hands and fingers together until they are dry, around 20 seconds.

Reminders:

- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Don't rinse or wipe off hand sanitizer before it is dry.
- Use enough sanitizer to cover all surfaces of hands.
- Adapted from CDC's Hand Sanitizer Guidelines and Recommendations <https://www.cdc.gov/clean-hands/about/hand-sanitizer>.

What Should I Do if I Become Ill?

Travelers' diarrhea (TD) is the most common illness that occurs while traveling according to the CDC. TD is usually the result of eating contaminated food or drink but is different from a foodborne illness. It was originally believed that following simple dietary recommendations could prevent TD. But people who followed these practices still became ill. Less rigorous hygiene and sanitation practices are likely the cause. Residents of the areas you may travel to may be able to enjoy some food and drink that may cause symptoms in travelers. They may have developed immunity to the organism that makes travelers sick.

Symptoms of TD include abdominal cramps, bloating, nausea, vomiting, fever, and general discomfort. The sufferer can expect to have multiple loose or watery stools per day for up to a week. This extra loss of fluid can cause dehydration. These problems can occur while you are traveling and/or after you return home.

The CDC advises that most cases of diarrhea require replacement of the fluids and electrolytes lost during the illness. Avoid iced drinks and dairy products as they may increase discomfort. Consider simplifying your diet and minimizing spicy, acidic, or carbonated items. Take frequent small sips of clear, room-temperature liquids such as water, sports drinks, broth, or caffeine-free tea. Make sure the liquids you consume follow the above safety protocols. For severe fluid loss, the CDC recommends replacing fluids using Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS). ORS packets are available at stores or pharmacies in most low- and middle-income countries.

As an added precaution, consider packing an antidiarrheal medication and antacid. In mild cases, these are effective in easing discomfort but are not a cure-all. In moderate to severe cases of TD that are interfering with planned activities, visit a medical provider if you have access, as you might need antibiotics.

Water Safety Tips

The safest method of minimizing the risk of illness from contaminated water is to avoid tap water in areas with limited access to water or with concerns about contamination. This means drinking bottled or canned beverages instead. If you only have access to tap water, you must purify it before using it. To purify, you can boil the water or use verified tablets, filters, or purification pumps.

Bring clear water to a rolling boil for one minute to kill bacteria and parasites. At altitudes greater than 6,500 feet, boil the water for three minutes. To avoid burns, let the water cool before use. Boiling is the simplest and most effective way to purify contaminated drinking water. Adding a pinch of salt and/or pouring the water from clean container to clean container several times will improve the taste.

Other water purification tactics include iodine or chlorine tablets, water filters, and purification pumps. Tablets available at most sporting goods stores are a reliable solution but should be used for short periods of time only. These disinfectants can kill bacteria and viruses in water, but do not work well to kill parasites. It is safest to filter the water before using these tablets to remove the parasites. Long-term use is not recommended. Follow the instructions on individual packaging for best results. Outdoor stores also carry water filters and purification systems. If you choose this method, buy a filter that suits your needs. The filter must have a very small pore size to filter viruses and keep all contaminants from getting through. This is likely the least effective method for avoiding illness and, if possible, should be used with one of the other techniques listed above.



Here are a few other water safety tips to remember:

- Avoid ice unless you are certain it was made with safe water.
- Brush your teeth with safe water only. Brushing with contaminated water could be as dangerous as drinking it.
- Wash personal items such as contact lenses and dentures with safe water. Consider all ways that you might be exposed to contaminants.
- Wipe any moisture from cans or bottles before drinking from them. Drink directly from the can or bottle whenever possible and avoid questionable containers.
- Bathe and/or shower only in reliable water. Do not swim in contaminated or unclean water including fresh water, seawater, and improperly treated pools, hot tubs, water parks, and splash pads.

For information on current outbreaks or immediate risks of foodborne illness in specific countries, consult the U.S. Department of State website at www.travel.state.gov or the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>.

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