Traveling Safely with Infants and Children

The number of children who travel or live outside their home countries has increased dramatically. An estimated 1.9 million children travel overseas each year. Health issues related to pediatric international travel are complex, reflecting varied activities, exposures, and age-specific health risks. While some travel health concerns are similar for children and adults, international pediatric travelers have unique problems because of variable immunity and different age-related behavior; for example, a newly mobile toddler will have different health risks than a sexually active adolescent. Furthermore, many travel-related vaccinations and preventive medications used for adults are not licensed or recommended for pediatric use.

Clinicians should obtain a complete assessment of travel-related activities and provide preventive counseling and interventions tailored to specific risks. Adults traveling with young children should be counseled to monitor the children carefully for signs of illness. Irritability may be a response to changes in time zone and environment but may also indicate illness in young children. Excessive or persistent irritability, fevers, or signs of dehydration should be evaluated promptly. Children with chronic diseases or immunocompromising conditions require travel preparations and treatment tailored to their specific underlying condition.

Diarrhea and Dehydration - Diarrhea and associated gastrointestinal illness are among the most common travel-related problems affecting children. Young children and infants are at high risk for diarrhea and other food and waterborne illnesses because of limited pre-existing immunity and behavioral factors such as frequent hand-to-mouth contact. Infants and children with diarrhea can become dehydrated more quickly than adults. Travelers should ensure that dairy products are pasteurized. Fresh fruits and vegetables must be adequately cooked or washed well and peeled without recontamination. Bringing finger foods or snacks (self-prepared or from home) will reduce the temptation to try potentially risky foods between meals. Meats and fish should be well cooked and eaten just after they have been prepared. Travelers should avoid food from street vendors.

Assessment and Treatment of Dehydration - The greatest risk to the infant with diarrhea and vomiting is dehydration. Fever or increased ambient temperature increases fluid losses and speeds dehydration. Parents should be advised that dehydration is best prevented and treated by use of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS), in addition to the infant's usual food. Rice and other cereal-based ORS, in which complex carbohydrates are substituted for glucose, are also available and may be more acceptable to young children. Adults traveling with children should be aware that sports drinks, which are designed to replace water and electrolytes lost through sweat, do not contain the same proportions of electrolytes as the solution recommended by World Health Organization (WHO) for rehydration during cases of diarrhea. ORS packets are available at stores or pharmacies in almost all developing countries.

Source: Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention