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What You Should Know Before
Traveling Abroad:

Health and Security Risks In China



INTRODUCTION

By 2020, China will be the most popular tourist destination in the world, having jumped from its current fourth place behind the United States, Spain and France. Will you be one of the millions of travelers who make China their destination? Or as China becomes more open to the West, will you be one of the expatriates who settle there?

If you are, you will probably purchase a guidebook and learn a few key phrases. But between finding the best restaurant in Beijing and learning to ask for the nearest hotel, will you know how to find help with replacing your passport? Learn to contact the police? Or where to seek medical treatment?

To be fully prepared for any trip to China – a vacation, a business trip, or a semester abroad – you must first understand the importance of planning ahead. Medical or security emergencies can happen at any time – just ask the student who fell off the Great Wall, the corporate executive who was in a car crash in Beijing, or the vacationer who lost his passport in Shanghai. By understanding some of the key differences in security and healthcare in China, you will be better prepared for your visit.

HOW CAN I STAY HEALTHY WHILE TRAVELING IN CHINA?

What Can I do Before I Leave Home?

When you enter China, you will complete a Health Declaration Form to notify authorities of any problems you may have. Travelers with Hansen's disease (leprosy), AIDS/HIV, venereal diseases, pulmonary tuberculosis or other infectious diseases may not be permitted to enter the country. If you visit a country where yellow fever is prevalent, and then try to enter China, you may be required to display proof of vaccination against the disease.

Even healthy travelers need to be prepared. While China is nearly the same size as the United States, it has five times the population, and the densely populated areas are prone to viral outbreaks. In major cities, traffic congestion creates air pollution that may affect travelers who have bronchial, sinus or asthma conditions.

Dr. Ahmed Youssif El Tassa, a FrontierMEDEX Physician Advisor living in Beijing, recommends "Travelers who suffer from allergies or any lung condition should drink about 2000 ml (8½ cups) a day of plain water while in China. Travelers suffering from allergies or any gastrointestinal condition should also avoid eating in local restaurants. The best choice would be having meals at world-class restaurants in major international hotels or at well-known fast-food chains."

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Common driving courtesies may be ignored, and pedestrians and bicyclists are often hit. As a result, China has the highest accident rate in the world.



Six to eight weeks before you depart for China, you should visit a travel clinic to receive any necessary vaccinations. Possible vaccinations include Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Typhoid, Japanese Encephalitis, and Rabies. Because of the prevalence of the disease, you should also consider receiving a flu vaccine before you go. The immunizations required may be different, depending on the cities you will be visiting and your planned activities. For example, travelers going to rural areas for one month or longer should be vaccinated against Japanese encephalitis; travelers who will have intimate contact with local residents, or are visiting for more than six months, should receive a Hepatitis B vaccination. More information is available from FrontierMEDEX's online medical resource, MEDEX 360sm Global Medical Monitor, but you should always check with your travel clinic doctor for details relating to your specific travel plans.

What are Common Threats to Travelers' Health?

In China, motor vehicle accidents frequently cause medical emergencies for travelers. Car ownership in China is growing and driving is chaotic. Common driving courtesies may be ignored, and pedestrians and bicyclists are often hit. As a result, China has the highest accident rate in the world. In fact, in 2003, China had more than twice the number of fatalities due to car accidents than the United States.

Car accidents are not the only health concern in China. While it is not present in urban areas, malaria can be a problem in rural areas below 4,900 feet. With the proper vaccination and plenty of insect repellent, exposure to this disease can be limited. When discussing your plans with a travel health professional, be sure to indicate where in China you will be visiting. China has different types of malaria – one chloroquine-resistant and one chloroquine-sensitive. Each kind may require a different prophylactic drug.

Other health concerns in China include dengue fever, Japanese encephalitis, and leishmaniasis, a parasitic disease spread by sand flies. Avoid poultry markets, and if you will interact with birds, including chickens and other domesticated fowl, avian influenza should be a concern. In the past five years, China has reported 30 cases of the avian flu in human, 20 of which were fatal. While it is highly unlikely that you will contract this disease, you can learn about precautions by visiting FrontierMEDEX's Pandemic Planning site, www.medexassist.com/pandemic.

Altitude sickness may affect travelers in western China. It typically occurs above 8,000 feet and is caused by a lower concentration of oxygen. It may take time to acclimate to a new altitude, and travelers should drink plenty of water. Symptoms of altitude sickness include headaches, loss of appetite, nausea, fatigue, dizziness, rapid heart rate, and shortness of breath. If left untreated, the condition can worsen and may become fatal. The obvious cure for altitude sickness is to return to a lower elevation, although there are several pharmaceutical treatments as well.



The quality and capability of medical facilities varies throughout China. Check with a travel assistance provider before seeking care to find the best provider.



Acetazolamide (Diamox) can help stimulate breathing, supplemental oxygen may help if there is fluid in the lungs, and high blood pressure medication may also aid in controlling the effects of altitude sickness.

If you require medical help while in China, additional health threats may result from problems caused by the language barrier. Coping with diseases, infections, and other health issues can be difficult enough in your native language, and yet thousands of patients receive treatment each day without being able to communicate with their physician. Local translators may help; however, medical terminology may not translate easily from one language to another. A recent study by the Medical College of Wisconsin found that language barriers can have a significant impact on a patient's treatment. Up to 60% of errors that occurred because of communication problems had "potential clinical consequences." If possible, you should locate a bilingual physician for help in accurately interpreting any treatment prescribed in a language you do not understand.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT IF I NEED MEDICAL CARE?

It is important to understand the healthcare system in China in case you need to seek medical treatment. Ambulances are not reliable in an emergency. In addition to getting stuck in traffic trying to reach you, they may lack sophisticated medical equipment, and the emergency staff may have little or no medical training. As a result, private transportation, even in an emergency, is often a more effective means for seeking medical care. It will save time to use transportation that is immediately accessible, rather than waiting for an ambulance.

China is shifting from a system of socialized medicine and public hospitals to privately-run, Western-care facilities. And, as China continues to open its borders, western medicine is becoming more common. Still, hospitals typically specialize in only one kind of care: Western Medicine or Traditional Chinese Medicine. However it is not unusual for some Traditional Chinese treatments to be prescribed in Western hospitals.

The quality of medical care varies throughout the country. In rural areas, medical care is more rudimentary than in urban areas. Training for doctors and nurses may not be up to international standards, and hospitals may not have modern equipment or plumbing. In fact, only 28% of the population in rural China has access to adequate sanitation facilities.

Urban hospitals offer better medical care than rural facilities. However, because outpatient treatment is provided by only a few urban facilities, public hospitals are used for even the most basic procedures. If you seek treatment at a public hospital, be prepared for it to be crowded. You will probably have to wait hours for care, and may have to pay a cash deposit prior to admission. Foreign health insurance plans are not accepted. It will be many years



China is an extremely safe country; however Westerners may be placed under surveillance by the government. It is safe to assume that all communications are being monitored.



before Chinese hospitals provide the same level of personal service as their western counterparts, and, in order to serve the country's 1.3 billion people at this level, an additional 500,000 doctors will be needed.

It is suggested that travelers seeking medical care will find better service in a private clinic. There are very few of these clinics available, but they are better suited for outpatient procedures and many have experience in treating foreigners.

Finally, it is important to note that the blood supply in China is not safe. Dr. El Tassa states, "The AIDS virus is a significant concern in China. There is a risk of exposure to unsafe blood and blood products in China." Medical evacuations are often necessary for travelers requiring blood transfusions. And if you seek medical care in China, Dr. El Tassa recommends travelers always request sterilized equipment, as it is sometimes reused from patient to patient.

HOW CAN I STAY SAFE WHILE TRAVELING IN CHINA?

What is the role of the government?

Strict governmental control means that China experiences very low crime rates and is safe for travel. As in any city, open-air markets, airports, and other tourist-centered areas may be prone to pickpockets and petty thieves. You should always take appropriate precautions to protect yourself: avoid traveling to unsafe areas, carry identification at all times, and mind the amount of cash you display in public.

For travelers in China, the government can be the source of security concerns. Foreign citizens, particularly those visiting on business, may be watched. Hotel rooms, telephones and fax machines may be monitored and personal possessions, including computers, may be searched – unbeknownst to you. It is safest to assume that, when in China, all of your communication will be monitored.

In general, avoid discussing politics and religion while in China. These are sensitive issues and are regulated by the government. Officials monitor information travelers bring into the country, especially political or religious material. Writing that is deemed anti-government is not allowed, including some Christian literature and anything that supports the Tibetan freedom movement. Travelers who work for aid organizations, non-governmental organizations or Christian groups may be closely watched for materials, and violators may be detained or expelled from the country.

If you claim dual-citizenship with China, you should avoid traveling as a Chinese citizen. If a problem arises, and you have entered the country claiming your Chinese nationality, you may not be



allowed to receive help from your home country. Chinese-Americans requiring legal help may not be allowed to contact the U.S. Embassy for assistance and, due to the strict governmental regulations, there may be little the U.S. Embassy can do to help.

I am Planning a Trip to China...Where do I Begin?

Wherever you travel, it is important to thoroughly research your destination. Take the time to understand the health and security threats that are unique to China and learn what precautions you can take to protect yourself.

One way to prepare for a trip to China is to partner with an international travel assistance and insurance company like FrontierMEDEX. Before you leave home, we can give you detailed information about receiving medical care in China, locating the nearest (and best) hospital to your hotel, and assessing the quality of care available. We can also give you information on safety and security, and provide more ways to protect yourself while traveling. With a travel assistance partner, you will also have the reassurance of knowing who to call and how to react should an emergency occur.

The internet also provides a wealth of travel resources; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/travel), as well as the World Health Organization (www.who.int/topics/travel), provide excellent medical information, and the U.S. Department of State (www.state.gov/travelandbusiness) provides quality security information. Other government websites provide additional security and travel information:

Australia	www.smartraveller.gov.au
Canada	www.voyage.gc.ca/consular_home-en.asp
U.K.	www.fco.gov.uk

These resources, however, provide general information about the country and very seldom offer detailed information about a particular destination.

In preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, FrontierMEDEX did extensive research into China's medical system. If you plan on traveling to China, consider using us as your premier resource and travel assistance provider. We can provide comprehensive information pertaining directly to you and your travel plans – wherever they may take you. For more information, please visit www.frontiermedex.com.

Who will you call for help?

What will you do in an emergency?

How will you find the nearest hospital?

These are all questions that you should be able to answer before you travel to China – or anywhere else.





Other FrontierMEDEX travel guides available:

What Every Company Should Know Before Sending Travelers Abroad:

Part I –
Medical Precautions and
Preparations

Part II –
Security Precautions and
Preparations

What You Should Know Before Traveling Abroad:

Cultural, Health and
Safety Advice for Women

Health and Security Risks
in India

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