

**What you need to know to stay healthy**

**when on mission**

Keeping in good health during your mission is essential for being able to do a good job. Being well prepared, for example adequately vaccinated, and taking certain precautions, for example boiling drinking water, will improve your chances of staying well. Even when working in high risk countries the risks can be reduced to a minimum by knowing how to look after yourself.

As a delegate you are responsible for your own health and should make every effort to remain healthy. You should familiarise yourself with **procedures for a hospitalisation or medical evacuation**, should you or a colleague need to be evacuated due to serious illness or accident. All delegates should receive an individual health briefing addressing general health issues as well as country-specific health hazards.

In this document you will find information about various topics and problems that might occur during your mission.

1. Hospitalisation, Medical emergencies and Insurance
2. Vaccinations
3. Psychological Support Programme
4. Alcohol and substance abuse
5. HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections
6. Malaria, Dengue and other tropical infections
7. Food, Water and Diarrhoea
8. Skin protection

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**1. Hospitalisation, Medical emergencies and Insurance**

If you are sick or have a health problem information should be available in the delegation about the care that is available locally. Ask the Country Representative or HR to show you the Medical Evacuation Plan which will have information about the recommended medical doctor, dentist and gynaecologist available. In case of serious illness, hospitalisation or medical emergency, the Health Officer, Geneva can be reached 24/7 on mob +41 79 217 3319.

Persons with conditions that can, under certain circumstances be life threatening, (such as severe allergies, diabetes) are advised to keep a card about their condition in their wallet and possibly tell one or two persons in the delegation about this if medication may be needed for immediate treatment.

Matters of possible concern to your health should be addressed before leaving to a foreign environment where health care facilities may be less than ideal. If you are taking medication for a pre-existing condition – make sure you take sufficient supplies of the medicines with you, since exactly the same drug can be difficult to find. Also, bear in mind that hot and humid climates can reduce the shelf-life of many drugs.

In case of **pregnancy** of delegate or accompanying spouse, Health Officer must be informed at least 4 weeks in advance about the coming delivery. Information about Guarantee of payment letter, Insurance, Birth certificate and child allowance will then be provided to the delegate.

**SOS International** provides extensive health information about every country in the world. Here you will find detailed information about local health problems, outbreaks of communicable diseases, recommended vaccinations, and much more. They also recommend quality clinics and hospitals.

www.sosinternational.com Password: 22AMMS000091

**2. Vaccinations**

Vaccinations, as recommended on the Medical Clearance form, need to be completed before departure. However, some vaccines can be difficult to find in certain countries. If you have this problem, contact the Health Officer in Geneva to discuss a possible solution. Keep the record of your vaccinations in a safe place and keep a copy somewhere else.

**3. Psychological Support Programme (PSP)**

Some degree of stress is inevitable when going on mission, and as long as there is a balance between stress and recreation, stress can actually help you to increase your performance.

The brochure

***“Managing Stress in the Field”*** provides essential basics about stress that every delegate should know about and each delegation should have copies. It is also available on FedNet.

However, conditions in the field are usually demanding and delegates need to know how to prevent stress from becoming harmful. It is important to recognise warning signs in oneself as well as in others, and to be aware of strategies that can help to alleviate harmful stress reactions. For this purpose, it is recommended that all delegates should have a session with the Zone stress counsellor. Once in the field, contact can be taken by phone, skype or email with the stress counsellors in Geneva or the Health Officer who can listen and assist with delegates’ concerns.

**4. Alcohol and substance abuse**

For a number reasons such as stress, loneliness, frustration, lack of leisure time etc, delegates sometimes increase their alcohol intake when on mission. However, it is a mistake to think that alcohol can help you to solve your problems. On the contrary the impact of alcohol may affect your performance negatively, blur your judgment and may endanger your own life as well as that of your colleagues.

*All drug use is illegal and therefore totally forbidden. In some countries alcohol is also illegal, and the internal regulations of the delegation will reflect this.*

Refer to Code of Conduct, clause numbers 2, 13 and 29.

**5. HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections**

During your mission you may find yourself in a high risk situation with regard to HIV. Being far from those whom you normally rely on for emotional support such as family and partner, feeling frustrated, and drinking alcohol, can contribute to risky behaviour.

Your risk of getting HIV is not about who or where you are – *It is about what you do!*

The Federation guide “HIV and You” has more information about how the HIV virus is transmitted and how you can avoid that. The HIV virus, which eventually will lead to AIDS, can be transmitted in 3 ways:

1. Through sex without a condom. The vast majority of all transmission occurs in unprotected sex between a man and women.
2. Through blood or blood products. Most commonly through sharing contaminated needles or syringes
3. From mother to child during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

Remember that a person can carry HIV in their system for many years, without knowing, and without showing any sighs or symptoms of HIV.

Consistent and correct use of condoms gives a very high level of protection.

The Federation Secretariat has a policy called *HIV in the workplace* which protects the rights of employees living with or affected by HIV. Stigmatization or discrimination of those living with or affected by HIV on the basis of real or perceived HIV status is not acceptable and may be subject to disciplinary action.

The Federation encourages employees to be tested for HIV. By knowing your status, you can take actions to adopt a healthy life-style, be able to access treatment if needed, and to protect sexual partners from infection. There is no obligation on the part of the employee to disclose their status to anyone. However, should the employee choose to share this information with a colleague or supervisor, the information must be kept confidential. If, for whatever reason it is necessary to share information (for example for reimbursement of medical costs) consent must be obtained from the person concerned prior to information sharing.

Post Exposure Prevention – PEP is a kit with anti-retroviral medication for treatment of a person for possible HIV infection, immediately after suspected exposure. It is intended for accidental needle stick injury or after a rape. For the treatment to work, it has to be initiated, preferably within 2-6 hours after exposure. The earlier the treatment starts, the greater the chances are that it will be effective.

Treatment should only be started on the recommendation of a medically qualified person. Guidelines to treatment are available on FedNet. Every ICRC- (International Committee of the Red Cross) delegation has PEP-kits which IFRC staff have access to. The UN also keeps PEP-kits which may be available to IFRC staff if needed. In the Medical Evacuation Plan it is noted where the nearest PEP-kit can be accessed.

Untreated STIs increase the risk of contracting HIV for both men and women.

 In addition, STIs put women at risk of becoming infertile. Condoms are the only effective means of protecting yourself and your partner from STIs. Condoms also give good protection against HIV and pregnancy.

**Sexually Transmitted Infections, STIs**

When infected with an STI, men and women get different symptoms: men usually have discomfort symptoms, burning sensation when peeing, yellow discharge and itching. For females, the symptoms can sometimes pass unnoticed. Early diagnosis and treatment are essential; for women to reduce the risk of becoming infertile, for both men and women to avoid spreading infection.

**6. Malaria, Dengue and other tropical infections**

**Malaria** is endemic in most of Africa, many parts of South-east Asia and parts of Latin America. It killsapproximately 2 million people every year, and infects millions more. It is spread by mosquitoes carrying the parasite that causes malaria.

Symptoms of malaria can develop as early as eight days after a mosquito bite but can also develop months after departure from a malaria endemic area.

It is important to be aware that clinical symptoms of malaria can vary widely, from being atypical – to begin with – to very severe. If a person has been taking prophylaxis, it can initially mask symptoms, making it look like flu.

The most important feature of malaria is fever, usually, but not always, after intense shivering. Each attack may last several hours and often begins with shivering, and then there is a period of fever and finally profuse sweating. Headache, pain in the back and in the joints all over the body, is often present. Vomiting and/or diarrhoea may also occur.

Individuals who have symptoms that resemble malaria should seek prompt medical attention. Delay of appropriate treatment can have serious or fatal consequences.

If there are neither health facilities nor a health professional at hand and you suspect you have malaria – you should start self-treatment. For more information about malaria – see the Federation Fact sheet on Malaria.

Strong measures of prevention are important as there is no vaccine for malaria yet. Most important of all is to sleep under a phyromethrine-treated bed net. In addition, if you cover bare skin in the evenings, use insect repellents and take prophylaxis recommended by your doctor, you are as close as you can get to adequate protection.

*If you develop symptoms that resemble malaria despite your best efforts then seek medical care without delay.*

**Dengue fever** is transmitted through mosquito bites in tropical and subtropical regions, mainly in Asia.

The disease is characterised by fever, headache, pain behind the eyes and severe aching of muscles and bones. A skin rash appears 3-4 days after the onset of fever. The illness may last up to 10 days, but complete recovery can take 2-4 weeks. It is extremely weakening.

While the disease is often mild and self-limiting, it may present in a severe form associated with haemorrhagic complications (internal bleeding), shock and in some cases death. The severe form called dengue haemorrhagic fever is more common in persons having their second or subsequent infection.

There is no vaccination for dengue fever. The only way to prevent infection is to avoid mosquito bites. Protective measures taken to prevent malaria infection will also be effective in reducing the risk of dengue.

**Bilharzia (shistosomiasis)** is essentially endemic in every fresh water lake and river in Africa, it is advisable not to swim and avoid prolonged contact with fresh water, e.g. washing clothes, wading through water. The parasites which cause the disease enter the body through the skin and will cause a serious condition in the liver which takes a long time to develop.

*Before you swim anywhere find out from local people whether conditions are safe.*

**Myasis**

The Tumbu fly is common throughout sub-Saharan Africa and it causes a disease called myasis. The adult flies lay eggs on sandy ground. Therefore avoid sitting or sleeping on the ground. The eggs can also be laid on wet clothing or drying laundry. These eggs can enter the body through the skin and they then develop into small worms or larvae which create abscesses. Ironing of all clothes and bed linen that have been drying outside effectively kills the eggs of the fly.

**7. Food, Water and Diarrhoea**

Contaminated food and water are two of the most common causes of diarrhoea and can also cause hepatitis A and typhoid fever. Foodshould always be thoroughly cooked and served hot. Leftover food must be handled with great care in a tropical climate. As soon as the prepared dish is cool enough- put in a well functioning fridge for a maximum of two days.

Food poisoning is the result of bacteria growing in food and usually becomes evident a few hours after eating and gives sudden onset of profuse diarrhoea and vomiting and sometimes fever. It usually doesn’t last long, 1-2 days maximum, but the weakness may persist a little longer.

Fruits and vegetables that can be peeled are fine to eat raw. Lettuce and vegetables that can’t be peeled are best avoided.

In a tropical climate, try to avoid buffet meals in restaurants and hotels, as there is a high risk of food poisoning. It may be difficult to know how long food has been standing in the heat and sometimes hygienic standards are not adequate. At any time, ham, salami, mayonnaise, and custard, creams, and eggs are best avoided. Do not eat any type of raw or undercooked meat.

If eating out while travelling, try to pick a busy restaurant and choose well cooked local dishes. Avoid salads as they may not be well washed.

**Water**

Drinking water should be boiled and filtered or disinfected with special water purifying tablets.When using a water filter remember to clean the filter regularly according to instructions.

Remember to carry safe drinking water with you when travelling to the field. Hot drinks like tea and coffee are safe. Milk and cream (including ice cream) should be avoided unless you know it has been pasteurised.

Generally, increase your intake of water in hot climates, and especially if you have diarrhoea or fever. Adding ORS (oral dehydration salts) to the water can be advisable in hot climates where you loose salts through sweating a lot. In hot climate you need to increase the fluid intake substantially to prevent dehydration.

**Diarrhoea**

Diarrhoea is the most common health problem affecting delegates. It can be caused by bacteria, viruses or intestinal parasites. Most episodes of diarrhoea are short lived and require no treatment other than replacing lost fluids and salts.

Fluid loss can be compensated by drinking water with rehydration salts (ORS), fruit juice, clear soup, or light tea. Milk products and alcohol are best avoided as these might worsen symptoms. Caffeine and alcohol can aggravate dehydration. Eat light foods like fried rice, bananas, papayas, potatoes, dry bread or biscuits. Frequent small meals are better than a few large ones.

Anti-motility drugs such as Imodium (loperamide) and Lomotil (diphenoxilate) reduce the bowel movements hence frequency of stools but *they do not treat the cause*. It is important to remember that anti-motility drugs are not curative and in particular that the fluid loss into the bowel continues.

If the diarrhoea lasts for longer than one day, or is accompanied by fever, or there is blood in the stools you should seek medical care and have a stool test to determine the cause. Serious diarrhoeal infections are relatively rare and are often accompanied by stomach cramps, vomiting and fever. Stools may contain mucus and are sometimes streaked with blood. In such cases the diarrhoea is generally caused by bacteria or parasites (giardia, amoebae) and may need treatment with antibiotics.

**8. Skin protection**

Exposure to the ultraviolet rays of the sun can cause severe sunstroke, especially in people with a fair complexion. You will adjust more easily if you expose yourself gradually, wear a hat, sunglasses and use sunscreen with a high protection factor. Doxycycline makes your skin photosensitive, meaning that you might burn more easily.

In hot/humid climates infections of small wounds are quite common, and may require several days to heal. Do not neglect minor wounds such as cuts and scrapes, insect stings and scratches - always disinfect and cover with dressing during the day, but if possible leave airy at night to help it to dry out. Change the dressing at least once a day and check that the area surrounding the wound does not become inflamed (red and hot). If it does, have the wound dressed by a health care professional.

*Beware of handling animals, especially monkeys, dogs, and cats, to avoid bites and serious diseases including rabies and plague.*

**9. Travel health**

Long flights, defined as a flight of four hours or more, carry certain risks.

Backache, constipation, joint pains and jet lag are possible consequences; but there is also the more serious risk of complications such as blood clots leading to thrombosis. Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) can occur anywhere in the body but commonly occurs in the legs. The blood clot forms because blood is trapped in the lower legs, and the circulation is reduced by uncomfortable position and lack of activity.

During the medical check up you should inform the doctor if there is any history of blood clots. The doctor may recommend the use of compression stockings or the taking of aspirin tablets.

To avoid deep vein thrombosis -

* have a long walk on the day before and the day after the flight.
* drink extra water or juice during the flight. Remember that coffee and alcohol can lead to dehydration.
* exercise on the plane both in your seat and in the cabin. Get up and move around every two or three hours.

If a clot develops despite all these precautions the leg will be red, painful, swollen and tender to touch. Consult a doctor as soon as possible to

minimise the spread of the clot and the damage it may cause.

***The risk of deep vein thrombosis is increased in people who smoke.***

**End of Mission**

Some delegates will have a session with the stress counsellor to help identify if there are any unresolved issues related to stress.

The delegate is encouraged to follow-up with an end of mission medical check up. The end of mission medical is valid for 6 months for a new mission. A review of vaccinations should be done at this time in order to receive necessary boosters in preparation for the next mission. The delegate is entitled to a good break before the next assignment.

Although, it is mainly the responsibility of the IFRC as employers to ensure that delegates have had sufficient time to recover but individuals are encouraged to reflect carefully about the need for rest, before accepting a new mission soon after a previous one.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact

the Health Officer, Geneva Tel +41 22 730 4417.

In an emergency - mobile phone +41 79 217 3319.

 

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