



CRUISING IS SOMETHING

to look forward to for months in advance, and you don't want your trip ruined by avoidable illnesses. The following points might help avoid that scenario.

A vacation at sea offers the best of all worlds, in many ways, such as seeing foreign countries without the hassle of constant packing, both shipboard and onshore activities, and a constantly changing view. Should you fall ill there are also "in-house" medical facilities and staff, but here are some additional considerations that will help you make the most of your oceanic adventure.

- **Bring your medications along**—A leading reason for passengers visiting ships' infirmaries is to obtain medications inadvertently left at home, or those you didn't anticipate needing. Some common over-the-counter medications and motion sickness preparations are available free from the ship's nurse. Many prescription and non-prescription items are stocked but may be expensive, not covered by drug plans, and not identical to the ones you use at home, possibly causing confusion.
- **Check your health insurance** to make sure it covers expenses incurred aboard ship and in ports. If not, buy travelers' assistance insurance. These plans

cover such expenses, including evacuation to a medical facility if none is available locally. Policies have exclusions addressing hazardous activities such as parasailing and diving, for example. Evacuation from ships is rare, but costs tens of thousands of dollars. Assistance insurance policies are available through your credit card company.

- **Know the location of the medical facilities**—Medical care aboard ship is designed to treat routine illnesses, provide emergency care, and stabilize serious medical problems. Most cruise physicians are trained in emergency medicine, and all speak English. You are responsible for fees, and injections,

x-rays, lab work, and “house” calls to cabins are extra. Fees may be waived for minor ship-related injuries.

- **Notify ship staff of conditions in advance**—If a family member has an ongoing medical problem, or mobility issues, consult the cruise line’s medical department several weeks before sailing. In most cases they will accommodate you.
- **Sunburns are common on cruises**—In the tropics, the sun is directly above, daylight is long, there is almost no haze to filter out rays at sea, and rays reflect off water, increasing exposure. In temperate climates, don’t let cool weather and breezes lull you into complacency; neither reduces radiation. Taking ibuprofen immediately after excessive exposure and before burn symptoms occur may alleviate discomfort, but does not reduce long-term skin damage. Use sunscreen at SPF 15 or above, and reapply frequently.
- **Most shipboard accidents are preventable**—The leading causes are embarking and disembarking, the rolling of the ship, and for adults, alcohol. Leave a small light burning at night. In many ports, ships do not pull up to dockside. Getting on and off launches, particularly in heavy seas, is potentially dangerous, so allow crewmembers to assist you. Many serious accidents occur ashore. Tropical beaches have undertows and poisonous and hazardous sea life, and few of them have lifeguards. In developing countries, watch for broken sidewalks, exposed roots, and unexpected steps. Many ports of call have only rudimentary medical services available.
- **Gastrointestinal (GI) illness**—Occasional outbreaks of vomiting and diarrhea continue to occur in spite of expensive and elaborate campaigns to eliminate the problem. Most cases are caused by the norovirus. Virtually all cases of norovirus are mild, self-limiting, and require no treatment. Frequent hand washing and keeping hands away from one’s mouth, eyes, and nose helps reduce risk infection.

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- **Seasickness**—Most modern ships are large and have stabilizers, and captains rely on sophisticated weather forecasts, making seasickness uncommon. Rough seas are predictable by geography and time of the year. Taking a cabin in the center of the ship is not particularly helpful. Should you feel queasy, stay on deck and focus your eyes on the horizon, or stay in a cool, air-conditioned, or well-ventilated area, recline, and keep their eyes closed and head still. Avoid large meals and the odor of food. Sip fruit juices. Transderm-Scop, a patch placed behind the ear, is effective but not approved for children less than 14 years of age. It requires a prescription, and there are side effects. Oral medications include Bonine, Marazine, Phenergan, and Dramamine. Injections of these are available on many ships.

Hurting on the High Seas

If you’re sick, report your illness. Before your voyage ask your cruise line if there are alternative cruising options, and consult a doctor to find out whether it is safe for you to sail. During your voyage visit the ship’s medical facility and follow the medical staff’s recommendations. Wash your hands often in order to avoid exposing yourself and others to anything that may cause illnesses and spread germs, especially after using the toilet and before eating or smoking. Avoid eating or drinking anything that you think will make you sick. Look for inspection scores and pay attention to general food service cleanliness to help you decide where and what to eat.

—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- **Update your immunizations**—Influenza vaccination is recommended for cruises for adults and children six months and older. Outbreaks have occurred aboard ships. For visits to exotic destinations, check with a travel medicine professional. For shore excursions, even ones lasting a few hours, you may need additional vaccines and preventative medications.
- **Pack a medical kit**—especially when traveling with children. Most illnesses children experience when traveling would have occurred had you remained at home (upset stomachs, colds, and such). Pack medications your children have taken recently. Include the telephone numbers of all their health care providers. Call them first if a problem arises. *✍*