

Got a question for our experts? Want to air your views? Have your say on these pages. This month, questions on travel vaccinations

ASK THE EXPERTS



Antonia Chitty advises on travel jobs – whether you're going abroad for business or for pleasure



Malaria muddle

I'm visiting the Gambia and need some anti-malaria medicine. I've heard that Lariam can have bad side effects. Is there an alternative?
Brenda Keyte
London SW2

A Lariam (mefloquine) can produce side effects such as anxiety, depression, or hallucinations and other symptoms in around one in 140 people (sleep disturbance and vivid dreams are more common). Fits and more serious neurological problems are rarer (Lariam isn't suitable if you have fits or suffer from depression or other psychiatric disorders). Despite these possible side effects, it's still the preferred drug for many countries and situations – and has the advantage that you need just one tablet a week.

There is an alternative

called doxycycline but this needs to be taken daily. It too has side effects (including diarrhoea or thrush and, more rarely, sun-sensitive rashes). Malarone is a new anti-malarial – for more about this, see 'Out to Africa', opposite.

The Gambia can be one of the worse places for contracting malaria, so do take one of the drugs – and use insect repellent, too.

GP or not GP?

Would I be able to get all the travel jabs I need from my GP, or would I do better going to a travel clinic?

Andrew Fry
Swindon

A GPs give free travel health advice, but often only provide typhoid, poliomyelitis, smallpox and the first dose of hepatitis A vaccines on the NHS. You'll probably have to

pay for anything else, including malaria-prevention drugs. Specialist travel clinics may be more convenient but they usually cost more. But they do tend to offer a longer appointment, and may be run by travel medicine enthusiasts who are up to date with the latest news and developments.

There's a selection of websites and organisations that give general information about travel vaccinations on p57.

Proving effective

A friend has told me that travel vaccines aren't effective. Which ones are worth having?

Josie Brown
Liverpool

A Trials have shown that the hepatitis A vaccine provides long-lasting protection in almost all adults after two doses, while typhoid vaccine has been shown to be effective in up to 93 per cent of adults. If you're going to an area where rabies is prevalent, you should consider being vaccinated. The vaccine won't stop the disease developing, but it does provide some protection and it certainly simplifies treatment. Yellow fever vaccine is obligatory for some countries.

No vaccine will guarantee 100 per cent immunity. You also need to be careful about what you eat and drink, and wash your hands regularly.

Boost your chances

When I had a hepatitis A injection some years ago, I was told it would last for only a few months. I've now heard it lasts much longer. What's changed?

Heather Holt
York

GET IN TOUCH

Our experts are now looking for questions on **tax, gas fires and other gas appliances** and **caring for teeth**. You can send your questions or comments for publication by post or fax to 'Letters page' at our Hertford address, p58, or by e-mail to experts@which.net.

Which? Online subscribers can also contact us via one of our forum groups.

We give **£15**-worth of Which? Books vouchers to the sender of our star letter; senders of all other letters printed receive **£10** in vouchers. We may edit letters, or use only an extract. We regret that our experts will answer only questions that we publish.






WRITEBACK

Share your views with other members

A People used to be given a single injection of immunoglobulin, which contains antibodies for hepatitis A. This offered short-term protection. It's not recommended these days because of concerns about the use of blood products. The current hepatitis A vaccine (which isn't a blood product) needs a booster at least six months after the initial vaccination, and then gives protection for ten years or more. It's best to have the initial dose at least two weeks before departure.

Out to Africa

I may need to visit Africa on business. Which vaccines should I make sure I have?
Dawson Harris
Newport, Gwent

A Make sure you're up to date with tetanus and polio, and ask your GP for advice about the parts of Africa you may be visiting. You should also have relevant vaccinations such as typhoid and hepatitis A, which last for three and ten years respectively. Meningitis vaccine may be appropriate, and plan ahead if you need yellow fever vaccination – it needs to be given at least ten days before departure.

Ideally, you should start most anti-malarials at least a week before travelling – this should give you time to see whether they cause side effects. A newly licensed product, Malarone, can be started one day before you go, but it may cause vomiting or diarrhoea. It's extremely useful in many situations but isn't necessarily the right drug for everyone. It's also more expensive than other anti-malarials.

A premium charge

I was delighted to win a top prize with a TPC Telecom Ltd (TPC) scratch card. The prizes, which included a BMW, seemed worth claiming. But to do so, I had to phone a number and listen to a recorded message. My top prize turned out to be three nights in a hotel, with very limiting conditions. Isn't this a rip-off?
Kathleen Simons
Shrewsbury

A TPC was investigated by Icstis, the premium-rate phonenumber watchdog, found to be in breach of Icstis' codes of practice and had to amend its scratch cards which were judged misleading. But it's under scrutiny again for a similar competition, and is also being investigated by trading standards. To complain about a premium-rate phonenumber, ring Icstis on 0800 500 0212.

Keen-sighted reader

In 'Decision not in sight' in July's 'Write back', you said lenses and spectacles would remain VAT-free pending the results of a tribunal. Does this mean I shouldn't have paid VAT on glasses I bought last year?
Philip Hutchinson
Wantage

A Our reply was misleading. VAT has been charged on glasses and lenses since 1988, so it's right you had to pay. The current debate is whether to charge VAT on opticians' services. If it is imposed, the overall price of lenses and specs will go up. We should have said 'opticians' services will remain VAT-free pending the results of the tribunal'.

On the carpet

I bought a carpet in India for about £200 including insurance, packaging and delivery to the UK. But I was charged an extra £41 for duty, VAT and administration by the delivery company. Is this legal?
Stephen Wood
Sandhurst, Kent

A Yes. If goods costing more than £18 are sent to you from outside the EU, you're liable for charges. Travellers arriving from outside the EU can bring in goods up to £145 without paying charges. For more about charges on importing goods, see 'Customs On-line' at www.hmce.gov.uk. You can also get advice by speaking to an adviser on the National Advice Service, 0845 010 9000, Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm.

Train ticket trouble

I tried to buy an Apex ticket for a train journey with First Great Western. The cheapest Apex tickets must be bought at least seven days in advance, but First Great Western was only able to confirm the times of the return leg three days before my departure. As a result I had to buy a more expensive ticket. Surely it's unfair for train companies to advertise fares which may not be available?
Chris Pocock
Kingston-upon-Thames

A First Great Western told us that it is unable to sell Apex tickets until it has a finalised timetable from Railtrack. Due to the recent emergency track repairs, timetables were often being finalised less than a week in advance. We agree

that First Great Western should have been clearer about the availability of Apex tickets. For more information on how to complain if you think you have been treated unfairly by a rail operator, see our article on p34.

Car insurance caveat

I bought a new car in 1999 complete with two years' free insurance. My insurer recently wrote to me about renewing the policy and said I had two years' no-claims discount (NCD). Before buying the car I had a 65 per cent protected NCD, but when I informed my insurers about this, they said that, unless I could prove it with a letter from my past insurers, they'd only give me two years' NCD. Are they allowed to do this?
Richard Ashby
Truro

A Unfortunately, yes, as the burden of proof lies with the motorist. At the moment there are no industry-wide procedures for logging NCDs, so it's important to obtain a letter of proof before you end your policy. This will allow your new insurers to verify your history. Your previous insurers may be able to provide you with a copy but aren't required to do so by law.