



Travelers' Health: Yellow Book

Health Information for International Travel, 2005-2006

Chapter 6 – Non-Infectious Risks During Travel

Swimming and Recreational Water Safety

Deaths due to drowning are estimated at 450,000 per year worldwide. Before departure, travelers should be reminded of some basic principles of water safety to reduce their risk of drowning while swimming or boating. Travelers should be advised never to swim alone or when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Likewise, no one should ever dive or jump into an unfamiliar body of water without first determining the depth (at least 9 feet for jumping and diving) and the terrain, and whether there are any hidden obstacles. Children should always be supervised when swimming or playing in or around the water. Travelers should try to select swimming sites that have lifeguards. A personal flotation device (life jacket) should always be worn when boating, skiing, or using personal watercraft, regardless of the distance to be traveled, the size of the boat, or swimming ability. Travelers should also be advised to learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and basic first aid to assist others in the event of a drowning or near drowning.

Travelers should be aware of local weather conditions and forecasts. They should be advised to be alert for and heed colored beach warning flags. Strong winds and thunderstorms with lightning strikes are dangerous to swimmers and boaters. Travelers should be reminded that open water usually has limited visibility, and conditions can sometimes change from hour to hour. Winds and currents are often unpredictable, moving rapidly and quickly changing direction. Swimmers and boaters should watch for dangerous waves and signs of rip currents (e.g., water that is discolored and unusually choppy, foamy, or filled with debris). A strong water current can carry even expert swimmers far from shore. Swimmers caught in a rip current should swim parallel to the shore until free of the current and then swim toward the shore.

Biting and stinging fish, corals, and jellyfish can be hazardous if touched. Larger marine animals are generally harmless and unless deliberately or accidentally threatened, injuries seldom result from aggressive action by the animals. Wounds acquired in the marine environment can be contaminated with bacteria, often contain foreign bodies, and occasionally contain venom. Travelers should be advised to wear protective gloves and footwear and avoid contact with corals and other marine animals.

Bibliography

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