Cruise Ship Travel

A cruise ship is a floating international community. With thousands of passengers and crew arriving and departing at various ports, the ship’s population is ever changing. Diseases can be brought on board either by an infected person or through contaminated food and water. Infections on cruise ships can spread rapidly.

What health risks should I be aware of?

- The most common on-board illnesses among passengers are: respiratory (29%), sprains/injuries (18%) and seasickness (9%), and gastrointestinal illness (9%).
- Gastrointestinal illness (9-16%) may sometimes be caused by norovirus which is a very hardy and infectious virus that can survive on practically any surface.
- Crew members (usually from developing countries) may harbour tuberculosis, hepatitis B, rubella and other infections.
- The risk of malaria (a mosquito-borne disease) varies amongst different cruises.
  - Significant risk – tropical African waters, Indian subcontinent and Amazon regions.
  - Some risk – exists on cruises along South America’s west coast.
  - Low risk cruises include those to urban centres in Asia.
  - No risk along the Yangtze or Nile Rivers or Caribbean cruises (except Haiti and Dominican Republic).
- Hepatitis A may be acquired on board the ship or on land-based tours, but symptoms may not appear for 2-8 weeks.
- All high risk travelers should consider influenza immunization. There is no evidence for or against a second dose of influenza vaccine in the same season.
- Legionnaire’s disease is a potentially fatal form of pneumonia most often affecting those over 50 years or those with immune problems. A ship’s whirlpools, spas, fountains or showers can generate the mists necessary to spread this disease.
- Yellow fever risk exists on Amazon cruises and on river cruises as well as other river cruises in parts of South America and Africa. Yellow fever vaccine may be recommended if port stops are made in countries where yellow fever exists. It may also be a requirement for entry on certain itineraries.
- If yellow fever vaccine is legally required, but there is no known risk of disease, a waiver letter may be issued if the vaccine is medically contraindicated.

Is medical care available on ship?

- On ship medical care is usually designed to treat routine illnesses, provide emergency care, stabilize serious medical problems and help with medical evacuations at the next port of call. There may be significant charges for these services.
No international body regulates the practice of medicine at sea and the quality of care varies widely.

How can I prevent health problems on my cruise?

- Before booking, ensure that:
  - medical facilities on board are adequate
  - your travel medical insurance covers the cost of on board medical care, including evacuation and return to Canada.
- Visit [http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/vsp/default.htm) to obtain your vessel’s sanitation inspection score.
- Practice good personal hygiene, particularly hand washing with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based gel with at least 60% alcohol.
- Follow safe food and water practices, particularly if eating off-ship or taking cruises originating in developing countries. If disembarking for inland visits to shore consider:
  - requesting a packed lunch
  - eating a larger breakfast and taking your own snack
  - purchasing bottled water from the ship before you leave.
- Foods most commonly linked with diarrhea outbreaks include seafood, eggs, potato and chicken salads, ice cream or creamy desserts and ice.
- Receive all vaccines recommended by the International Travel Centre.
- If pregnant or planning a pregnancy, discuss your rubella immune status with the International Travel Nurse.
- Protect yourself against insects to prevent malaria, dengue and yellow fever.
- Take appropriate antimalarial medications if advised by the International Travel Centre.
- Practice safer sex:
  - receive hepatitis B vaccine
  - use condoms.
- Keep all medications and a summary of medical information with you.
- Cruise ship travellers with chronic diseases or special needs should notify the cruise line before travel (e.g. wheelchair access, oxygen needs or dialysis).
- If prone to seasickness:
  - talk to your pharmacist or physician about taking medication (e.g. dimenhydrinate [Gravol®] or scopolamine [Transderm®])
  - to be effective medication must taken before symptoms begin.
- Other suggestions for seasickness:
  - lie flat on your back
  - minimize head and neck movements
  - minimize visual activities like reading
  - focus on far away objects such as the horizon
  - avoid large meals and excessive alcohol
  - cabins located in the middle of the ship may improve symptoms
  - deep breathing and fresh air
- Complete all scheduled medical, dental or surgical procedures, and recuperation, before departure.

Health risks can be minimized by sensible planning and a few precautions.

For more information, call the International Travel Centre at (306) 655-4780
[www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/internationaltravel](http://www.saskatoonhealthregion.ca/internationaltravel)