

Staying Healthy Naturally in the Third World

by Leslie Korn, Ph.D., M.P.H.

©1985 – 2001 Leslie Korn

Originally published in EastWest Journal, 1985.

Planning a trip to India to study Yoga? Embarking on a safari in Kenya? Or maybe joining a work brigade in Nicaragua? And suddenly your friends and colleagues are barraging you with terrifying tales of *turista* and other exotic diseases whose names you've never heard before and you begin to wonder, "Is it possible to stay healthy naturally while traveling in the Third World?"

The answer is a resounding yes! And if you are already holistic in your approach to health and attentive to diet and nutrition, then you're ahead of most travelers in your ability to maintain health or to recover quickly and easily from many encounters with diseases common in Asia, Africa, or Central and South America. The key to remaining healthy in the tropical world is the same as in the temperate climates: prevention. Many of the health problems of the Third World were once common in modern industrialized countries, but better sanitation water systems have helped eliminate them. The following are a few important guidelines for preventing some of the health problems most often associated with traveling in the Third World.

Bring your own food on airplanes. Nuts, seeds, and dried fruits provided quick energy; prunes stimulate peristalsis. Vegetables such as celery, cucumber, and lettuce prevent dehydration.

Drink a glass of water for every hour in flight and while traveling in higher altitudes. Dehydration takes place quickly on airplanes and at altitudes over 5,000 feet, and may lead to dry, cracked skin, headaches, and sinus congestion.

Increase vitamin C intake. Vitamin C detoxifies and strengthens the immune system, and has been used to lessen the effects of insect bites, snakebites, and scorpion stings. Studies suggest that a deficiency in Vitamin C increases both the multiplication and invasive power of the amoebic parasite *E. histolytica*.

Take papain/bromelain tablets before protein meals. Papain and bromelain are proteolytic (protein-digesting) enzymes derived from papaya and pineapple. The enzymes aid digestion and protect against infection from intestinal worms. In fresh papaya, the papain is located under the skin of the *unripe* fruit and when scored, will ooze out. Apply this topically to skin infections, bee stings and toothaches. Because papain liberates histamines from tissues, some people are allergic to it both internally and topically, so use with care. Bromelain is found in ripe pineapple, the highest concentration located in the core. In addition to its value in digestion and in preventing dysentery, pineapple is rich in calcium (use for leg cramps), dissolves mucus, and is an active diuretic.

Boil all water for a minimum of ten minutes unless you are assured of its purity. Drinking water may be purified by boiling, and in rural areas, let the contents of the water settle to the bottom before pouring off into another container. Use only purified water ice cubes.

Soak all fruits and vegetables in a combination of one capful of Chlorine Bleach per gallon of water. After ten minutes transfer the food to a gallon of purified water (no chlorine bleach) and let soak for 10 minutes. Dry and use. This procedure will kill parasites and cysts, which are often present on vegetables grown with manure. Additionally, it will reduce the level of pesticides, which are present on the fruit or vegetables.

Carry a little stove, pot, and condiments to cook some of your own foods.

If, in spite of all your preventative measures, you develop diarrhea and it lasts longer than 2-3 days, with symptoms of cramping and fever, then chances are you are fighting a bacterial, amoebic, or parasitic infection. It is often possible to self-diagnose and self-treat, based on your symptoms, but if you do not improve within 2-3 days it is essential to consult a health worker or physician.

If you become ill, consider the following.

Ask what diseases are prevalent in your locale. Is there cholera or typhoid, dysentery, or hepatitis? Keep in mind that many diseases have an incubation period of 3 days to 2-3 weeks, so if you are traveling you may bring a virus from one area to another.

Have a fecal sample analyzed at a local laboratory. Unlike in the U.S., it is not necessary to have a physician's note to have a fecal analysis performed in most Third World countries. It is often necessary to analyze two or more samples and since local laboratories are familiar with local strains of bacteria and viruses, have it analyzed where you are.

There are traditional healers and herbalists all over the world, and many have particular specialties. Refer to the list of centers in Resources at the end of this article (sorry not included here), either before you arrive or if you become ill. They will be able to put you in contact with local, reputable, natural healers.

Eat garlic. Garlic is a natural remedy for treating infections due to bacteria or parasites. Albert Schweitzer is said to have used garlic in Africa to treat Amoebic dysentery and laboratory tests have shown garlic juice diluted to one part in 125,000 inhibits the growth of staphylococcus, streptococcus, vibrio cholera, and the bacillus associated with dysentery. Garlic is also effective when applied topically to fungus and skin infections.

Eat miso. Carry packets of freeze-dried miso, or a container of regular miso so you can replenish intestinal flora if you become ill. Umeboshi in its various forms is also helpful.

Dehydration. One of the greatest dangers off diarrheal disease is dehydration. Dehydration poses the greatest threat to infants and young children, but anyone can become dehydrated, especially when malnourished or chronically ill. As soon as diarrhea begins you must start oral rehydration therapy. Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) are available in most health centers and pharmacies in the less developed world, but if you are unable to obtain the prepared packets you may make your own. The recipe is:

- 1 Quart boiled water (with ½ cup orange or lemon juice if available)
- 2 Tablespoons honey
- ¼ teaspoon sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda (optional)

Drink two glasses after each elimination, and up to 3 quarts a day. Infants should continue to be breastfed and fed up to a quart of the solution daily. Children receive 2 quarts daily. When it is possible to eat food, choose foods that are rich in potassium such as mashed bananas, papaya, coconut, and orange juice. Brown rice and cinnamon provide bulk and protein and the cinnamon acts as an astringent, helping to cleanse the intestinal tract and reduce gas. Continue to drink the rehydration fluids as long as diarrhea persists.

Many drugs are available over-the-counter in Third World countries; many are useless and even dangerous. The oft-prescribed drug Lomotil (diphenoxylate and atropine) is one such drug. Lomotil slows intestinal spasms but does nothing about the cause of the diarrhea. If the spasms are painful, take 20 drops of tincture of valerian. In children, Lomotil may stop normal intestinal contractions and result in serious or fatal respiratory depression. Another commonly available medication, Entero-Vioform (iodochlorhydroxyquin) has been banned by many countries yet remains on the shelves of others. Entero-Vioform is an anti-diarrheal drug which has been linked to sub-acute-myeloneuropathy, which can cause paralysis and blindness. Under no circumstances should you take this drug.

Another drug, which is commonly used in the Third World, is called *Flagyl*, or *metronidazole*. It is prescribed in the U.S. for trichomonas and throughout the world for amoebiasis. Side effects may include nausea, headaches, and diarrhea. **Flagyl** should never be used by pregnant women or people with a history of blood disease. Animal studies have pointed to the mutagenic effect of Flagyl in doses equivalent to those given to women for trichomas or amoebic dysentery. If you know that you have parasites or once you return have symptoms, obtain ParaGuard or Black Walnut extract.

By following many of these simple, hygienic procedures, you will have increased protection against many of the infectious diseases common in the Third World. Keep in mind your reasons for travel and of prime importance is the challenge to harmonize with the people, culture, and environment. Culture shock is a real phenomenon, which may manifest as irritability, disorientation, and depression. Travel slowly, sleep a lot, eat lightly and drink plenty of juices and purified water. Illness is often a transitional state that requires that we slow down and take stock of our movements. Though you may be traveling through economically poor areas, they are often culturally rich and shake us out of our insularity and chauvinism. Thus, when the local population takes a break at mid-day, for food and rest, join in the custom, for as the old adage goes: when in Rome... and it remains good healthy advice.

MEDICAL PROPERTIES OF COMMON TROPICAL FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

Aloe Vera	The Mexican Indians call this plant the “Wand of Heaven” and plant it next to their homes to prevent illness. The gel is applied to burns and used internally to alleviate constipation. Recent research in Saudi Arabia points to its use in lowering blood sugar.
Apples	Rich in malic acid, which restores healthy intestinal flora and dissolves gall stones. Cider contains methyl-aldehyde, a powerful antiseptic and is used traditionally in India to prevent Cholera.
Avocados	Rich source of protein, vitamins A and B. The skin is roasted and pulverized and one tsp. taken daily to eliminate intestinal worms.
Bananas	Rich in pectin, which draws bacteria from the intestines and regulates bowel flow.
Cabbage	The fresh juice is antibacterial against E. coli and staphylococcus.
Chamomile	A nervine, which aids insomnia, reduces anxiety and nightmares. It activates gastric juices and increases appetite.
Cinnamon	Alleviates nausea, gas, cramping and diarrhea.
Cloves	Clove tea is a traditional Indian remedy for diarrhea. The whole clove or clove oil is placed on a toothache to reduce pain.
Coconut tapeworm.	A nearly complete protein, rich in B vitamins. The fresh meat is used to kill tapeworm.
Fenugreek	Rich in potassium, phosphate, lecithin, and iron. Beneficial for allergies.
Garlic	Antibacterial, antifungal, antithrombotic.
Ginger	Reduces travel and sea sickness, stimulates blood circulation. Drink a tea of the fresh root during fever.
Grapes	Rich in iron; a laxative. Decreases the amount of uric acid in the system and is helpful in treating gout and kidney stones.
Guavas	Rich in vitamin C. The fruit is used to kill ameobas; the leaves are boiled for dysentery.
Honey	Antibacterial. Use topically for bee stings and wounds and internally for dysentery, hepatitis, and rehydration.
Lemon/Limes	Rich in vitamin C. Use with honey for cleansing the liver during hepatitis. Kills bacteria when applied to seafood. Disinfects wounds and reduces the itch of insect bites and stings.
Licorice	Native to India and Pakistan, licorice contains Glycyrrhizin, which induces sodium retention and extracellular fluids and is therefore useful in preventing thirst. Valuable for coughs, diarrhea, and urinary infections. Recent research shows extracts are useful in treating herpes. Should be avoided by people with hypertension or cardiac problems, or who are pregnant.

Mango	Native to India and found all over the tropical world, mango has been called “God’s nectar.” A tea from the leaves promotes circulation. Dry and pulverize the seed and take internally for intestinal worms.
Olive Oil	Apply to insect stings, jellyfish stings, man-o-war, and hairy caterpillar bites.
Onions	Contains sulphide of Allyll, an antiseptic. In China, onion tea is used for fever, dysentery, headaches, and cholera.
Pomegranates	Contains the alkaloid pelleterine, ananthelmintic.
Soursop	Rich in vitamin C; reduces blood pressure; a diuretic.
Tamarind	Strong diuretic. Rich in malic, citric, and tataric acids.

<p>The Traveler’s Survival Kit</p>

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Vitamin C <input type="checkbox"/> Slippery elm bark powder
<i>(for diarrhea and bronchial congestion)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Senna Pods
<i>(constipation)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Lactobacillus acidophilus <input type="checkbox"/> Sunblock 30 <input type="checkbox"/> Aloe vera gel <input type="checkbox"/> Clove oil <input type="checkbox"/> Oil of citronella
<i>(insect repellent)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Tincture of valerian
<i>(insomnia, anxiety, pain)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Papain/bromelain tablets <input type="checkbox"/> Dried miso-soup packets <input type="checkbox"/> Cayenne pepper
<i>(stops bleeding)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Cornstarch
<i>(prevents chafing, diaper rash)</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Snakebite kit <input type="checkbox"/> Thermometer <input type="checkbox"/> Dental floss <input type="checkbox"/> Bandages <input type="checkbox"/> Ace bandage |
|---|--|

Common Causes of Intestinal Illness

Infective Agent	Source	Symptoms	Natural Remedy
Shigella (<i>bacterial dysentery</i>)	Fecal-oral route (swallowing bacteria present in food or water infected by human feces)	incubation is 24-48 hours sudden onset, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, fever, blood stained mucus in stools	garlic, acidophilus, miso, rehydration therapy
Giardia lamblia (<i>protozoal</i>)	Fecal-oral route	yellow-frothy diarrhea, no blood, anorexia, cramps, a lot of gas, weight loss	Giardia often clears up on it's own; treat the same as Shigell
E. histolytica (<i>Amoebic dysentery</i>)	amoebic cysts present in water or food	gradual onset, 6-8 evacuations per day, bloody stools no fever, tight abdominal sensation after meals	garlic, acidophilus, miso, guavas, onions
Ascaris (<i>Roundworm</i>)	fecal-oral, generally vegetables grown in infected manure	indigestion, dry cough, weakness, sometimes worms may be seen in stool	all forms of intestinal worms: papain/bromelain, papaya, pineapple, garlic, fresh
Trichuris (<i>Whipworm</i>)	contaminated soil or vegetables	diarrhea, weight loss, indigestion	
Ancylostoma duodenale/ Necator americanus (<i>Hookworm</i>)	these two varieties are picked up through the skin, especially barefeet from contaminated soil	diarrhea, cough, nausea, anorexia, may cause anemia	