

TRAVEL VACCINATIONS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA



South East Asia is a favourite holiday destination for many travellers. With its vibrant cultures, amazing beaches, delectable food and welcoming people, this makes South East Asia truly an exciting and accessible hot spot destination.

You may have spent many hours trawling through websites for the best hotel deals, applied for your passport, carefully sorted through your luggage and have already dreamt of sipping cocktails by the beach.... but wait! What about your travel vaccinations?

South East Asia is also a place where you may be exposed to a multitude of viruses and diseases that many Westerners are not accustomed to or are vaccinated against. Below is a guide of the important travel vaccinations you will need and some essential tips to ensure that you stay safe and make the most out of your holidays!

Firstly, it is important to plan ahead for your travel vaccinations. Some vaccinations need to be given at least four to six weeks in advance while others may need a series of injections. Don't despair if you have not left much time before departing. In many instances, you can get the first set of vaccinations before your trip and then get the required boosters on your return.

Secondly, when visiting your Doctor, please ensure that you bring all previous vaccination records with you (if any). Unless, you have an exceptionally good memory, I find that not many people can recall what vaccinations they have had in the past, when they had received them and whether the vaccinations are still valid.

Thirdly, be very specific about your itinerary so that the correct vaccinations can be given. For example, if you are travelling to a few countries backpacking in remote rural areas for a long period of time or trekking through the jungle for weeks at a time – you are more at risk than someone who is visiting the city for a few days staying in a hotel.

Deciding which travel vaccinations to have before your travel to South East Asia basically comes down to your own personal decision as the answer is a rarely one-size-fits all. It also depends on how much peace of mind you are willing to pay for as some travel vaccinations are not cheap. The good news is that most of the vaccinations will last a long time (some lasts ten years or even a lifetime) so most of the cost is upfront and you will not need to go to the clinic very often.

Other factors to take into account includes which countries you are visiting, where you will be staying, the length of stay, time of the year, activities you plan to take part in, vaccination history and personal health. These will all determine which travel vaccinations will be advised for you.

Some travellers may opt to wait until they arrive at their destinations to get vaccinated because this is much cheaper. Just be aware that many vaccinations require some time for them to work effectively so you may be exposed to the local water and other potential nasties in the meantime.

The following is an overview of the possible vaccinations you may need for your travels in South East Asia:

1) **Tetanus** – this is an absolute must have for all travellers. Tetanus is an infection spread by a bacterium called *Clostridium tetani*. It is not spread through human contact but through bacteria in

soil, dirt, manure and even in dust. The bacteria can find its way into the body through small cuts and scrapes.

It is impossible to monitor all of the environment factors associated with travel so the tetanus vaccine will protect you and put your mind at ease.

Tetanus infection causes serious, painful spasms and stiffness in all muscles of the body. It can cause locking of the jaw resulting in difficulties in opening the mouth, swallowing and breathing.

One dose of the tetanus vaccination will last 10 years.

2) **Hepatitis A** – this is another important vaccination to have to protect against Hepatitis A – a debilitating liver disease. It is spread by contaminated food and water. Hepatitis can occur worldwide but most common in countries where sanitation is poor. Your risk of contracting Hepatitis A is quite high if you are travelling to a developing country as you will have little control of who handles your food, drinks or utensils and how meticulous they are with hand-washing. Symptoms include stomach pain, nausea and vomiting.

The Hepatitis A vaccination consists of 2 doses, 6-12 months apart. The protection is good for at least 20 years.

3) **Hepatitis B** – is highly contagious and is spread by infected saliva, blood and body fluids. It is contracted not only via sexual contact but by getting tattoos, body piercing, getting a haircut, shaving, manicures and pedicures (where there is a possibility of a skin nick with contaminated equipment). Another possible way is through medical and dental treatments eg. blood for transfusion may not have been adequately screened for Hepatitis B, if the doctor or dentist are not using sterile gloves or if the medical/dental equipment have not been sterilized properly. Symptoms of Hepatitis B may not be apparent for months or years. Complications can include liver scarring and failure as well as liver cancer.

There is a combined Hepatitis A/Hepatitis B vaccine. It consists of three doses given over a period of 6 months.

4) **Typhoid** – this is another absolute must have vaccination for most travellers. Typhoid fever is a systemic infection caused by the Gram-negative bacillus *Salmonella typhi*. Typhoid is spread by the faecal-oral route and is found throughout the world but more common in countries where sanitation and hygiene is poor including parts of South East Asia.

It is contracted through contaminated water – ice, fruits and salads washed with dirty water, wet plates in restaurants, shell fish from sewerage contaminated water, etc. Typhoid is recommended for travellers to countries where the water is not safe to drink. It is also recommended for those who are more adventurous with their foods or those who plan to work or live with the local people.

Remember to complete your vaccination at least one week before you travel so that the vaccine has time to take effect. Typhoid vaccination loses effectiveness after three years so re-vaccination with a booster dose is recommended every three years.

5) **Rabies** – for those who are planning on trekking, camping, staying in more remote areas, working on a farm or working closely with animals are strongly advised to have the rabies vaccine as treatment may not be available for several days. Rabies is caught by the bite or scratch of an infected animal like dogs and bats. Initial symptoms include headache, fever and weakness. The rabies virus infects the central nervous system, ultimately causing disease in the brain and death.

The rabies vaccine is given as a series of three injections four weeks prior to travel.

6) **Japanese Encephalitis** – this is spread by mosquitoes that breed in and around rice paddies and hang out in pig sties. This mosquito bites pigs and birds – humans are infected accidentally. Your

chances of encountering Japanese encephalitis are low. Only travellers who plan to live or travel in rural areas for extended period of time should consider this vaccine.

The JE vaccine should be commenced at least 4 week pre-travel.

7) **Malaria** – is found in many tropical and subtropical countries. Malaria infected mosquitos are most present in the regions of Thailand that border the countries of Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia. Symptoms include fever, tiredness, vomiting and headaches. If untreated, it can progress and lead to seizures, coma and death.

There is no vaccination but you can protect yourself against malaria with a course of antimalarial tablets. Please discuss with your doctor to ensure you can tolerate the medications, side effects and that the medications are appropriate for your destination. It is important to remember that no malaria tablets is 100% effective. Other precautions such as insect repellents, covering up with long sleeves and trousers and sleeping under a mosquito net are all essentials to avoiding mosquito bites and reducing risk of infection.

Other risks and considerations

1) Always purchase quality travel insurance before your trip – one that includes emergency medical evacuation. You will thank yourself when you suddenly get taken ill into hospital and medical costs are spiraling sky high.

2) If you take regular medications, make sure you have enough supply to cover you for the trip. Keep a copy of the prescription with the medications and keep all medications in the original labeled packages and bottles in case there are any queries when going through customs.

3) If you wear contact lenses, take along your glasses and prescription in case you lose one. Also the environment may be very dusty especially during dry seasons and wearing contact lenses all the time may not be so practical.

4) If you have any niggling tooth pain, it is wise to see your dentist before your trip. Don't leave this to the last minute in case you may need several visits to fix the problem. Having tooth pain during your travel will be no fun at all!

5) While holidaying in South East Asia, it is highly recommended to drink purified bottled water rather than the local tap water due to the risk of contamination and water borne diseases.

When purchasing beverages in bars, always ask for no ice because of the risk of contaminated water served in iced drinks. Also try and avoid fruits and salad washed in the local tap water. For those who plan on taking extended trips in rural areas, water purification devices or tablets are highly recommended.

6) Be cautious what food you choose to eat – street food may be part of the cultural experience and looks tempting but the price you may have to pay afterwards will not be worth it!

7) In many South East Asian countries, especially Vietnam, there are many street dogs wandering around markets. It is best not to feed or pat any animals and to wash your hands immediately if you do come into contact with them.

8) Many rural areas have problem with malaria and Dengue fever. Be vigilant with insect repellants, use mosquito nets, wear long sleeved tops and trousers and avoid being outdoors in rural settings after dark.

9) Complete booster doses of your vaccinations once you get home. It is tempting to skip the return visits to the clinic. Otherwise, if you forget about it, you may need to start an entire series of shots all over again to guarantee immunity.

10) Keep a record of all your vaccination records as many vaccinations lasts for years if not a lifetime. You will not be able to remember which vaccines you have had five or ten years ago. You may end up receiving duplicate vaccinations that will be both a waste of time and money.

Vaccination provides significant protection against infectious diseases and their complications that can cause long-term illness, hospitalisation and even death.

Remember to plan ahead. It is important to seek advice from your doctor on vaccinations prior to your travels as the type of vaccinations will be tailored to your needs and your personal levels of risk for the country that you are travelling to. Happy holidays!