



Health Issues and the Hajj

More than Two Million people from over 140 countries converge on Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. There are many illnesses that you can be exposed to, but there are also many things you can do to help you stay healthy. One of the best things you can do is visit a travel clinic before you go, to make sure you have the information, medication, and vaccines that you need for a safe and enjoyable trip.

What do I need to do before I go?

Make sure any known medical problems are stable: If you have any chronic medical problems you should also see your primary care provider before you leave to make sure your health needs have been addressed.

Vaccines (“Shots”): These are a very good way to prevent you from becoming ill with several different diseases:

Meningitis: Meningitis is a very serious contagious infection of the brain and spinal cord. It can be spread by close contact with people who are infected, but a vaccine can keep you from getting this disease. The government of Saudi Arabia **REQUIRES** all pilgrims going on the Hajj to have a vaccination for meningitis within three years of leaving for Saudi Arabia. The vaccine must be given at least 10 days before arriving in Saudi Arabia.

Other vaccines: You should also get a flu shot and vaccinations for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B if you have not already had these diseases (talk with your doctor about this). If you are over the age of 60, get a pneumonia vaccine.

What should I be aware of while in Saudi Arabia?

Heat-related Illnesses:

Summer temperatures in Mecca can climb to over 45 degrees Celsius, and it can become quite cold at night. You may spend long hours standing in the sun, and it is easy to become ill from the heat.

- Resting, pacing yourself, and staying hydrated are essential to prevent heat-related illnesses
- Perform rituals at night if possible, to avoid the hot sun
- If you are doing rituals during the day, sit or stand in the shade whenever possible
- Always keep your shoes on or nearby, or you could lose them and risk burning your feet
- Carry water bottles with you, and fill them with water every chance you can. Consider wearing a belt with water bottles.
- Wear sunscreen to prevent sunburn (SPF 15 or above)



Diarrheal illnesses:

Many travelers become ill with diarrhea. There are simple things you can do to help protect yourself:

- Wash your hands often
- Do not buy food from street vendors, especially raw foods
- Do not eat fruit that has not been washed or peeled by you
- Drink only water that is bottled or has been boiled.
- If you have minor diarrhea, you can use bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol) or loperamide (Immodium), both of which are available at a pharmacy without a prescription (both of these should NOT be used in children).
- Talk with your doctor about a prescription for an antibiotic to treat diarrhea. You should take this if you have diarrhea lasting over 2 days, or if you have diarrhea with a fever. If you are severely ill, have a fever, or have diarrhea that is bloody do not take loperamide or bismuth
- If you or someone you know does get diarrhea, it is very important to drink fluids and keep up with hydration. If you notice that someone is becoming too tired to drink, you must get them to medical care

Respiratory illnesses:

With so many people crowded into limited spaces, diseases can travel very fast. Getting a flu shot before you leave can keep you from getting one type of respiratory illness. One very good way to prevent getting sick is wearing a mask, which you can get from your health care provider . If you have a cough, cover your mouth to prevent spreading illness to others.

Barbers: If you will be shaving your head, use a sanctioned (legal) barber. Nonsanctioned (illegal) barbers may use unclean blades and pass on diseases from one person to another.

Special Circumstances:

- Contact lenses: the desert conditions can dry out lenses. Consider wearing glasses instead
- Diabetes: There are risks from both high and low blood sugars. Talk with your doctor before you leave to get a plan for managing your diabetes.
- High blood pressure: If you are on certain high blood pressure medications you need to be extra careful about becoming dehydrated.