

health

If you're going to study away, you've got to consider your health. From navigating a new health care system to overcoming culture shock to figuring out where to buy a cold remedy, you'll have new things to think about.

So, it's a good idea to think about your health (both physical and mental) before, during, and after you travel. In fact, when choosing a program it's a good idea to evaluate how "healthy" it is (how good is the program orientation? is there knowledgeable, available on-site staff? is insurance included in the program fee?) because living away means a new lifestyle and a new environment—two things that really affect your health. The good news is that with planning and awareness, living in another environment can be a very healthy experience.

before

assess and address your state of mind

Consider your own mental and physical health issues; Deep down, you know that going away is not a magic cure for problems at home. Any physical and emotional health issues you have will follow you wherever you travel. New circumstances can even exacerbate existing issues into crises while you're away from home. If you are concerned about your physical or emotional health, including use of alcohol or other controlled drugs, address your situation honestly before going away. Make all your necessary health information available to your program's administrators in the U.S. and overseas so they can assist you with any special needs, or advise you on the risks you might face. Study away may include both physical and mental challenges for students, so make sure you establish a support network of program administrators, family and friends who can help you.

identify your needs

Understand—and communicate—any health requirements you have when applying for a program and making housing arrangements. This means allergies, psychological therapy, dietary requirements, disabilities, and any other medical or special educational needs. Disabled students study overseas successfully all the time, though resources and services for people with special needs vary widely by country and region. If you have been using services here at home to address those needs, make sure you understand ahead of time exactly what accommodations can and will be made. In some cases, your needs may determine which program is suitable for you.

ask questions, get answers

There are health-related things you'll need to know about your host country, from the quality of water to the laws governing the import of medications to customs concerning the use of alcohol and drugs. Find out about the various illnesses that might be more common to the regions and countries to which you will be traveling. Get the appropriate shots and pills, and take the appropriate medications with you if your doctor thinks it's necessary. Find out about any potential side-effects of shots and pills that you may take. Some places to start asking:

- family physician
- campus health service
- campus study away advisor
- local public health department
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov; 800.311.3435)
- U.S. State Department Overseas Citizens Emergency Center (888.407.4747)
- Mobility International (www.miusa.org; 541.343.1284) if you have a disability

see your doctors

A visit to your physician, gynecologist, and dentist is a must to ensure you leave healthy—and prevent emergencies while away. Get a complete physical, eye exam and dental check-up before going overseas. Get immunizations and hepatitis protection if needed for the region you're traveling to. Check whether medications and medical supplies are available in your host country; if not, carry a supply with you. Pack copies of all

medical records and prescriptions, including for eyeglasses. If you think you'll need regular medical care abroad, take along a letter of introduction from your doctor at home that includes details of your medical treatment. While health care is generally good overseas, the quality of dental and medical care might be different in the various countries or regions you may visit. Also, they could possibly be more expensive than similar care in the United States.

verify health insurance coverage

It's something to consider when choosing a program: some study abroad packages include health insurance as part of the program fee and some do not. Check your regular policy to see what coverage it provides for medical services overseas—and whether your plan pays the provider in your host country directly, or you must pay yourself and seek reimbursement later. Be sure you have coverage for medical evacuation and repatriation of remains, in case you need to be flown back to the U.S. for medical treatment. Make certain you'll have coverage for continuing treatment of newly acquired medical conditions once you return home. If you have questions, the international office at your school may be able to help.

Bringing Medications or Filling Prescriptions Abroad

A traveler going abroad with a preexisting medical problem should carry a letter from the attending physician, describing the medical condition and any prescription medications, including the generic names of prescribed drugs. To be cautious, get a doctor's signed prescription for any medication you have to bring with you overseas, and get it translated into the local language. However, if you can, take a supply large enough to cover your stay while there, just in case you can't fill your prescription while overseas. Any medications being carried overseas should be left in their original containers and be clearly labeled. Travelers should check with the foreign embassy of the country they are visiting to make sure any required medications are not considered to be illegal narcotics and how much U.S. prescription medication is allowed. (A listing of foreign embassies and consulates in the U.S. is available on the [Department of State's website](#) . Foreign embassy and consulate contact information can also be found on the Country Specific Information for each country.)

If you wear eyeglasses, take an extra pair with you. Pack medicines and extra eyeglasses in your hand luggage so they will be available in case your checked luggage is lost. To be extra secure, pack a backup supply of medicines and an additional pair of eyeglasses in your checked luggage.

If you have allergies, reactions to certain medications, foods, or insect bites, or other unique medical problems, consider wearing a "medical alert" bracelet. You may also wish to carry a letter from your physician explaining required treatment should you become ill.

Information on filling a prescription abroad and other health issues may be found at http://travel.state.gov/travel/tips/brochures/brochures_1215.html.

pack your own first-aid kit

Never underestimate the importance of being prepared. Always travel with basic medical supplies close at hand:

- Band-Aids and bandages
- rubbing alcohol
- sterile pads
- sunscreen and sunburn ointment
- anti-diarrhea medication
- gauze and adhesive tape
- antibacterial ointment
- pain reliever and aspirin
- antacid
- rubber gloves
- flashlight

Don't forget the health maintenance supplies:

- regular medications (check expiration dates before you go)
- contraceptives (if you need them)
- feminine hygiene products (if you're traveling where they are not available)
- hand sanitizer

Depending on where you're headed, you may also need:

- water purification tablets
- antihistamines
- anti-diarrhea tablets
- salt tablets
- skin moisturizer
- insect repellent
- malaria prophylaxis

Other things to keep in mind:

- **Can You Drink the Water?:** Find out if water is generally safe to drink in different regions of Abroad and in the countries to which you will be traveling. To avoid diarrhea and other bacteria, purify questionable water before you drink it. Make sure water bottles come sealed when you buy them. Remember that ice can also be unsafe, as well as the water you use to brush your teeth.
- **Food Safety:** If you get diarrhea or food poisoning, remember to drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated. As with any illness, consider seeing a doctor if your condition worsens. Give your body time to adjust to new types of foods you will be eating
- **Fitness and Exercise:** Try to get fit in the time you have before departing. A healthy body can help you fight off illness and recover faster if you do get sick. Even though it may be harder to follow a structured workout routine, try to stay fit while away. Exercise also helps to increase energy levels and combat depression. Get a good pair of comfortable walking shoes. Without access to a car or public transportation overseas, you may have to do quite a bit of walking. Break in your shoes before you go.

during

give yourself time to adjust

Expect jet lag—and a little culture shock. Get your body on the new schedule by drinking plenty of non-alcoholic fluids, eating plenty of nutritious food, exercising, and resting. Culture shock is a natural effect of being exposed to new lifestyles and values, so don't be surprised if you feel a bit impatient, confused, or anxious, or if you hit emotional highs and lows as you adjust. Time usually takes care of it, but if any problems persist, consult your on-site program director or get help from a counselor or doctor.

seek out resources

Learn how you'll get routine and emergency medical help before you need it. Who will provide your care and how can you reach that provider? Is there a 911-style emergency number? If so, what services does it provide? If you need any special help such as a self-help group or services for a special need or disability, find out how to get it.

make medical needs known

If you have a medical condition, tell those in your host country who can be of assistance, including doctors who can provide care and people in your dormitory who can help in an emergency.

learn about local customs

Lifestyles, practices, and expectations will be very different from home—even in places that seem on the surface to be relatively similar to the U.S. Make sure you understand how things work. Don't assume that behavior you took for granted at home will be accepted in your host country. Ask about:

- safety issues such as local transportation, swimming practices, and electrical appliances
- security issues such as neighborhood security, and personal security at night
- cultural issues like attitudes toward gender, friendship, and dating

make new friends

It may not sound like a health tip, but don't isolate yourself. You will probably have to make the first move in developing friendships, but they'll make the whole experience worthwhile (not to mention keep you sane).

after

Going home can seem like the best part when you think about the hundreds of photos you can show and the hundreds of stories you can tell. Just be aware: most U.S. students experience culture shock when they return, too.

self-evaluate

You'll have discovered a lot of new things while studying away. Realize how those new experiences may have changed you. Do you have new interests? New attitudes, opinions, perspectives? Changed values? Have your expectations of your friends and family changed? Your new haircut may be only the beginning.

moderate your expectations

Your trip transforms you, but not your friends and family. Problems that existed when you left may still be there when you return. Or things may have changed while you were gone. Be prepared to realistically face issues in all your circumstances and relationships.

take care of yourself

Jet lag will kick in, and you'll have to adjust again when you return. Rest, exercise, eat healthy, and continue any medications you need.

share your experience

Help friends and family understand this new part of your life by sharing the most important parts of your time away, including pictures and other mementos—but be prepared for some who have not traveled away to have a limited attention span. If you want to talk more, or if you feel a bit alienated from friends and family, connect with faculty, your study away advisor, or other returning students. Take advantage of re-entry workshops your study away office may provide; you'll meet new friends and share your experiences with people who will listen and understand.

make it last

Some schools have programs that enable you to serve as a peer advisor for other prospective study away students. Constantly look for ways to continue your experience and the transformation it brings.

pre-departure health musts

- assess and address your state of mind
- identify your needs
- ask questions, get answers
- check health advisories
- see your doctors
- verify insurance coverage
- pack your own first-aid kit
- check laws regarding bringing prescriptions in to host country