

HEALTH

Health issues (and the quality of medical facilities) vary enormously depending on where you are in Vietnam. The major cities are generally not high risk and have good facilities, though rural areas are another matter. Travellers tend to worry about contracting infectious diseases in Vietnam, but serious illnesses are rare. Accidental injury (especially traffic accidents) account for most life-threatening problems. We strongly recommend having a good health insurance and carrying a good first aid kit.

The following advice is a general guide only.

AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

The significant improvement in Vietnam's economy has brought with it some major advances in public health. However, in remote parts, local clinics will only have basic supplies – if you become seriously ill in rural Vietnam, get to Hochiminh City, Danang or Hanoi as quickly as you can because this major cities have international clinic's which provide better service for minor ailments. For surgery or other extensive treatment, don't hesitate to fly to Bangkok, Singapore or Hong Kong.

- ✚ **Private Clinics:** These should be your first port of call. They are familiar with local resources and can organise evacuations if necessary. The best medical facilities – in Hanoi, Hochiminh City and Danang – have health facility standards that come close to those in developed countries.
- ✚ **State Hospitals:** Most are overcrowded and basic. In order to treat foreigners, a facility needs to obtain a special licence and so far only a few have been provided.
- ✚ **Self-Treatment:**
 - If your problem is minor (eg travellers' diarrhoea) self-treatment is an option. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention.
 - Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common. Check expiry dates on all medicines.

BEFORE YOU GO

All travelers should consult their doctor with regards to vaccinations and up-to-date health advice at least 4-8 weeks before departure.

- ✚ Pack any medications in clearly labelled containers.
- ✚ Bring a letter from your doctor describing your medical conditions and medications.
- ✚ If carrying syringes or needles, have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.
- ✚ If you have a heart condition, bring a copy of a recent ECG.
- ✚ Bring extra supplies of any regular medication (in case of loss or theft).

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

No vaccinations are officially required by the Vietnamese authorities, but immunization against some certain diseases is highly recommended.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to Southeast Asia:

- ✚ **Adult diphtheria and tetanus:** Single booster recommended if you've had none in the previous 10 years.
- ✚ **Hepatitis A:** All travellers to Southeast Asia should be vaccinated against hepatitis A. Travelers can get hepatitis A through contaminated food or water in Southeast Asia, regardless of where they are eating or staying. Vaccine is recommended for all travelers over one year of age. It should be given at least two weeks (preferably four weeks or more) before departure. A booster should be given 6-12 months later to confer long-term immunity.
- ✚ **Hepatitis B:** Travellers can get hepatitis B through sexual contact, contaminated needles, and blood products, so this vaccine is recommended if you might have sex with a new partner, get a tattoo or piercing, or have any medical procedures.
- ✚ **Measles, mumps and rubella (MMR):** Measles, mumps, and rubella are serious diseases and vaccines against them are required unless you have had the diseases. Many young adults require a booster.
- ✚ **Typhoid:** Travelers can get typhoid through contaminated food or water in Southeast Asia. This vaccine is recommended for most travelers, especially if you are staying with friends or relatives, visiting smaller cities or rural areas, or if you are an adventurous eater.
- ✚ **Varicella:** If you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

Other health risks in Vietnam include

- ✚ **Travelers' diarrhea** is the most common travel-related ailment. The cornerstone of prevention is food and water precautions, as outlined below. All travelers should bring along an antibiotic and an antidiarrheal drug to be started promptly if significant diarrhea occurs, defined as three or more loose stools in an 8-hour period or five or more loose stools in a 24-hour period, especially if associated with nausea, vomiting, cramps, fever or blood in the stool.
- ✚ **Japanese Encephalitis:** Travelers may need this vaccine if your trip will last more than a month, depending on where you are going in Vietnam and what time of year you are traveling. You should also consider this vaccine if you plan to visit rural areas in Vietnam or will be spending a lot of time outdoors, even for trips shorter than a month. Your doctor can help you decide if this vaccine is right for you based on your travel plans.
- ✚ **Malaria:** Prophylaxis is recommended for travelling outside, spending a lot of time outdoors or sleeping outside the main cities and towns, the Red River delta and north of Nha Trang. There has been an increase in the amount reported cases of dengue fever in recent years, and visitors should take care to protect themselves from mosquito bites during the day, especially just after dawn and just before dusk, particularly in the southern Mekong Delta region.

- ✚ **Rabies:** Rabies can be found in dogs, bats, and other mammals in Vietnam, so this vaccine is recommended for the following groups:
 - Travelers involved in outdoor and other activities (such as camping, hiking, biking, adventure travel, and caving) that put them at risk for animal bites.
 - People who will be working with or around animals (such as veterinarians, wildlife professionals, and researchers).
 - People who are taking long trips or moving to Vietnam
 - Children, because they tend to play with animals, might not report bites, and are more likely to have animal bites on their head and neck.
- ✚ **Yellow Fever:** vaccine is required for all travelers arriving from a yellow-fever-infected country in [Africa or the Americas](#) and for travelers who have been in transit more than 12 hours in an airport located in a country with risk of yellow fever transmission, but is not recommended or required otherwise. Yellow fever vaccine must be administered at an approved yellow fever vaccination center, which will give each vaccinee a fully validated International Certificate of Vaccination. Yellow fever vaccine should not in general be given to those who are younger than nine months of age, pregnant, immunocompromised, or allergic to eggs. It should also not be given to those with a history of thymus disease or thymectomy.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

- ✚ **Heat**
 - Many parts of Vietnam are hot and humid throughout the year. Take it easy when you first arrive. Avoid dehydration and excessive activity in the heat. Drink rehydration solution and eat salty food.
 - **Heat exhaustion** Symptoms include feeling weak, headaches, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin and a fast, weak pulse. Cool down in a room with air-conditioning and rehydrate with water containing a quarter of a teaspoon of salt per litre.
 - **Heatstroke:** This is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include weakness, nausea, a temperature of over 41°C, dizziness, confusion and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and start cooling by following cooling treatment.
 - **Prickly heat:** A common skin rash in the tropics. Stay in an air-conditioned area for a few hours and take cool showers.
- ✚ **Air Pollution:** Air pollution, particularly vehicle pollution, is severe in Vietnam's major cities. If you have severe respiratory problems consult your doctor before travelling.
- ✚ **Food:** Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting travellers' diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and buffets. Peel all fruit and try to stick to cooked vegetables. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.
- ✚ **Bites & Stings**
 - **Bedbugs:** These don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. Move hotel, and treat the itch with an antihistamine.

- **Jellyfish:** In Vietnam, waters are most not dangerous, just irritating. Pour vinegar (or urine) onto the affected area. Take painkillers, and seek medical advice if you feel ill in any way. Take local advice if there are dangerous jellyfish around and keep out of the water.
- **Leeches:** Found in humid forest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites can be intensely itchy. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.
- **Snakes:** Both poisonous and harmless snakes are common in Vietnam, though very few travellers are ever bothered by them. Wear boots and avoid poking around dead logs and wood when hiking. First aid in the event of a snakebite involves pressure immobilisation via an elastic bandage firmly wrapped around the affected limb, starting at the bite site and working up towards the chest. The bandage should not be so tight that the circulation is cut off, and the fingers or toes should be kept free so the circulation can be checked. Immobilise the limb with a splint and carry the victim to medical attention. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out. Antivenom is available only in major cities.
- **Ticks:** Contracted during walks in rural areas. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash (at the site of the bite or elsewhere), fever or muscle aches, you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.
- ✚ **Skin Problems:** Fungal rashes Common in humid climates. Moist areas that get less air, such as the groin, armpits and between the toes, are often affected. Treatment involves using an antifungal cream such as clotrimazole. Consult a doctor.
- ✚ **Cuts and scratches:** Minor cuts and scratches can become infected easily in humid climates and may fail to heal because of the humidity. Take meticulous care of any wounds: immediately wash in clean water and apply antiseptic.
- ✚ **Sunburn**
 - Even on a cloudy day, sunburn can occur rapidly.
 - Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30).
 - Reapply sunscreen after swimming.
 - Wear a hat.
 - Avoid the sun between 10am and 2pm.
- ✚ **Drinking Water:** Be very careful of what you drink. Tap water is heavily chlorinated in urban areas, but you should still avoid it. Stick to bottled water, which is available everywhere. Ice is generally safe in the cities and resorts, and is often added to drinks and coffee.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

- ✚ Supplies of sanitary products are readily available in urban areas. Birth control options may be limited, so bring adequate stocks.
- ✚ Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), during which the risk of pregnancy-related problems is at its lowest. Some advice:
 - **Rural areas:** Avoid remote areas with poor transportation and medical facilities.
 - **Travel insurance:** Ensure you're covered for pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.