

# HEALTH

## AVAILABILITY & COST OF HEALTH CARE

- ✚ Laos has no facilities for major medical emergencies. The state-run hospitals and clinics are among the most basic in Southeast Asia in terms of the standards of hygiene, staff training, supplies and equipment.
- ✚ For minor to moderate conditions, including malaria, **Mahasot Hospital's International Clinic** in Vientiane has a decent reputation. Some foreign embassies in Vientiane also maintain small but professional medical centres, including the **Australian Embassy Clinic** and the **French Embassy Medical Center**.
- ✚ For any serious conditions, Thailand is the destination of choice. If a medical problem can wait until Bangkok, then all the better, as there are excellent hospitals there.
- ✚ For medical emergencies that can't be delayed before reaching Bangkok, ambulances can be arranged from nearby Nong Khai or Udon Thani in Thailand. **Nong Khai Wattana General Hospital** in Nong Khai is the closest. The better **Aek Udon Hospital** in Udon Thani is an hour further from the border by road.
- ✚ Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common in Laos.

## 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

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.

### Health risks in Laos 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:** vaccine is recommended for those who expect to spend a month or more in rural areas and for short-term travelers who may spend substantial time outdoors or engage in extensive outdoor activities in rural or agricultural areas, especially in the evening. Japanese encephalitis is believed to occur throughout Laos. The disease is transmitted by mosquito bites, probably from May through October.
- ✚ **Malaria:** When traveling in Laos, you should avoid mosquito bites to prevent malaria. You may need to take prescription medicine before, during, and after your trip to prevent malaria, depending on your travel plans, such as where you are going, when you are traveling, and if you are spending a lot of time outdoors or sleeping outside.
- ✚ **Rabies:**
  - Rabies can be found in dogs, bats, and other mammals in Laos, 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 Laos
    - 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.
  - Any animal bite or scratch should be thoroughly cleaned with large amounts of soap and water and local health authorities should be contacted immediately for possible post-exposure treatment, whether or not the person has been immunized against rabies.
  - **Yellow Fever:** vaccine is required for all travelers arriving from a yellow-fever-infected country in [Africa or the Americas](#), 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 younger than nine months of age, pregnant, immunocompromised, or allergic to eggs.

- **HIV/AIDS:** According to Unaid and WHO, Laos remains a 'low HIV prevalence country'. However, it's estimated that only about one fifth of all HIV cases in Laos are actually reported. Heterosexual sex is the main method of transmission in Laos. The use of condoms greatly decreases but does not eliminate the risk of HIV infection.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

- ✚ **Snakes:** Southeast Asia is home to many species of both poisonous and harmless snakes. Assume all snakes are poisonous and never try to catch one. Always wear boots and long pants if walking in an area that may have snakes. 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. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out.
- ✚ **Food:** Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit and cook all vegetables. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.
- ✚ **Drinking Water**
  - Never drink tap water.
  - Bottled water is generally safe, but do check the seal is intact at purchase.
  - Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it.
  - The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or people who suffer with thyroid problems.
  - Water filters should protect against viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size.
- ✚ **Sunburn:** Even on a cloudy day, sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), making sure to reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (from 10am to 2pm). If you are sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered.
- ✚ **Skin Problems:**
  - Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. Watch out for moist areas that get less air, such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. The problem starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil.
  - Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic.

### Insect Bites & Stings

- Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine.
- Ticks are contracted during walks in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash, fever or muscle aches, then see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.
- Leeches are found in humid forest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.
- Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment.

### Heat

- Many parts of Southeast Asia are hot and humid throughout the year and it takes time to adapt to the climate. Swelling of the feet and ankles is common, as are muscle cramps caused by excessive sweating. Prevent these by avoiding dehydration and excessive activity in the heat.
- Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include feeling weak, headache, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin, a fast, weak pulse and a normal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun, fanning the victim and applying cool wet cloths to the skin and rehydrating with water containing a quarter of a teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid, though it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.
- Heatstroke is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include weakness, nausea, a hot dry body with a body temperature of over 41°C, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, seizures and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and commence cooling by getting the person out of the heat, removing their clothes, fanning them and applying cool wet cloths or ice to their body, especially to the groin and armpits.
- Prickly heat is a common skin rash in the tropics, caused by sweat being trapped under the skin. The result is an itchy rash of tiny lumps. Treat by moving out of the heat and into an air-conditioned area for a few hours and by having cool showers. Locally bought prickly heat powder can be helpful.