

Injuries & Safety in international travellers

Persons crossing international boundaries away from their medical support systems are exposed to risk for illness and injury. The burden and regional risk variation of travel-related injury death continues to be a problem. The risk of injury to international travellers has been recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) and by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Injuries are the leading cause of travel-related mortality worldwide, accounting for up to 25 times more deaths than infectious disease. Obtaining health and evacuation insurance prior to a trip is very important particularly for travellers with underlying medical conditions, those planning trips to developing tropical or subtropical regions of the world or for long-term international travellers.

What are the main causes of injuries in travellers?

Traffic accidents, drowning, accidents related to water recreation activities and violence constitute the most common causes of injuries in travellers. Other causes of injuries include natural hazards during outdoor and wilderness activities, due to the popularity of eco-tourism and adventure travel which is likely to increase the number and diversity of accidents in remote locations, falls, burns, poisoning, drug overdose, suicide, civil unrest, and terrorism.

How common are injuries/death in travellers?

Injuries among people aged 5–44 years account for 7 of the 15 leading causes of death worldwide. Injuries account for approximately 5 million deaths worldwide. Injury is the second most common cause of death of those away from their home country, after cardiovascular disease. Travellers are 10 times more likely to die as the result of an injury than from an infectious disease. It is estimated that injuries cause 18-24% of travellers' deaths compared with only 2% caused by infectious diseases. More than three-quarters of non-lethal accidents take place in people between 25 and 54 years.

European Union (EU) countries are among the leading tourist destinations in the world. Despite growing consumer demands on the safety of travelling, injuries amongst tourists remain an essentially invisible problem. The relative age distribution indicates that travellers between 25 and 44 years of age and between 45 and 64 years of age – both predominantly male – are specifically prone to suffer from fatal injuries during vacation; the latter group, mainly from overexertion during physical activity (swimming, skiing, mountain hiking), the former mainly from traffic accidents.

In regards to travellers to Greece, in 2000, 2% of the total injuries treated at hospitals and 3,5% of the fatal injuries in Greece affected tourists. Compared to residents, tourists got injured more frequently between 15 and 64 years of age and fatally injured more frequently between 25 and 44 years of age, in particular men. Transport (mainly road traffic) and drowning accounted for over 70% of fatal injuries among non-domestic tourists.

Motor vehicle crashes consistently emerge from the travel medicine literature as the most common cause of injury death for tourists. Nearly 3,500 people die every day, including 1,000 children, worldwide as a result of traffic accidents involving cars, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, trucks, or pedestrians; a number likely to double by 2020. More than 85% of these casualties (and 96% of child deaths) occur in low- and middle-income countries.

Drowning is consistently reported as a leading cause of injury death among tourists. The death rate among all divers, worldwide, is estimated about 15–20 deaths per 100,000 divers per year. The risk factors may be related to unfamiliarity with local water currents and water conditions, rip tides, dangerous sea animals, such as urchins, jellyfish, and coral. Alcohol also contributes to drowning and boating mishaps. Scuba diving and snorkeling have been increasingly popular for travellers in coastal destinations.

Violence is a very important cause of injury and or death for travellers. In 2000, about 1.6 million people died to violence and one-fifth were casualties of armed conflicts. Violent deaths in low- to middle-income countries are more than 3 times higher than those in higher-income countries.

Which are the contributing factors of travellers' injuries?

The incidence of travel related injuries depend on travel destination, duration, and planned activities. Furthermore gender may be a contributing factor to injuries among travellers; men are more likely than women to die from injuries while travelling. Acquaintance rape and sexual assault are risks to women travellers.

Contributing factors to the traffic accidents during travel include exposure to unfamiliar and risky environments, driving on the opposite side of the road, communication problems due to language difficulties, and inadequate vehicle standards, unfamiliar rules and regulations, increased risk-taking behavior as a result of a carefree vacation spirit, and overreliance on travel and tour operators to protect one's safety and security.

In terms of the risk of violence, travellers are viewed by many criminals as wealthy, inexperienced and naïve, unfamiliar with the culture, and therefore good targets. Visiting high-poverty areas, in unfamiliar environments and in particular at night, civil unrest, alcohol or drug use, increase the likelihood that a traveller will be the victim of planned or random violence.

How can accidents be prevented?

Travellers should be aware of the regional variation of injury deaths in foreign countries, especially for motor vehicle crashes, drowning, and violence.

For the prevention of **traffic accidents** travellers are advised to:

- Carry an international driving license as well as a national driving license
- Have full health insurance cover for medical treatment of both illness and injuries and evacuation

- Beware of the regulations governing traffic and vehicle maintenance, and on the state of the roads, in the country of destination
- Know the informal rules of the road (e.g. sound the horn or flash the headlights before overtaking).
- To check the state of the tires, seat belts, spare wheels, lights, brakes, etc before renting a car
- Be particularly vigilant in a country where the traffic drives on the opposite side of the road to that used in the country of their residence
- Avoid driving on unfamiliar and unlit roads
- Avoid driving a moped, motorcycle, bicycle or tricycle
- Avoid drinking alcohol before driving
- Drive within the speed limit at all times
- Always wear a seat belt if available
- Beware of wandering animals.

In order to reduce the risk of **drowning** travellers should:

- Supervise children in or near recreational waters
- Not drink alcohol before any water activity
- Assess the depth of the water before diving, and avoid diving or jumping into murky water
- Not jump into water or jump onto others in the water
- Use life jackets where appropriate
- Pay attention to tides and currents
- Avoid outlets in spas and swimming pools

Regarding **violence**, it is advisable for travellers to avoid travelling at night, to travel with a companion, and vary routine travel habits. Expensive clothing or accessories should be avoided. Accommodation should not be booked on the ground floor of hotels. If confronted, travellers should give up all valuables and not resist attackers.

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