

While Studying Abroad: Your Personal Health

Taking care of your personal health will help you have an enjoyable and successful time studying abroad. Living in another culture often entails a change in diet, different expectations about alcohol consumption, and stresses from living in a new place and culture.

NUTRITION

Living in another culture often entails a change in diet and changes in daily eating routines and assumptions. Diets in other countries can be significantly more or less nutritious than diets in America. It is important to be aware of what you are eating. Traveling will bring your body into contact with new and different bacteria than you are used to. These bacteria are not necessarily harmful in themselves, but the change can unsettle your stomach or cause health problems.

Food should be selected with care. Any raw food could be contaminated, particularly in areas of poor sanitation. Foods of particular concern include salads, uncooked vegetables and fruit, raw meat, and shellfish. If you peel fruit yourself, it is generally safe. Food that has been cooked and is still hot is generally safe. In addition, water, including ice cubes, unpasteurized milk, and milk products, could upset your digestive system until your body adjusts to new surroundings.

If you are a vegetarian, you may find it particularly challenging to maintain a healthy diet. You may want to research the foods offered in your host country. You may want to bring protein powder, vitamins, and other dietary supplements with you to provide good nutrition while abroad. Talking with other vegetarians who have studied abroad may be helpful, as well.

COLD SELF CARE

It is likely you will experience cold symptoms while you are abroad. Unfortunately, there is no cure for the common cold. Upper respiratory infections or colds are an inflammation of the upper respiratory tract caused by many different virus strains that cannot be cured by antibiotics. Most colds generally last 4-5 days. Over-the-counter medications may reduce your symptoms. The UHS web site provides recommendations for self-care for four common cold symptoms ([cough](#), [nasal congestion](#), [sore throat](#), and [fever](#)). Also included is advice to help you decide if you should seek medical care.

Colds are spread mainly from person to person through coughs, sneezes, and mucus on a person's hands. You can pick up the virus from books, towels, door handles, etc. that people with a cold virus have touched.

The best ways to reduce your chances of catching a cold are:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water often and every time you touch your face.
- Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- Discard your tissue after using it once.
- Avoid kissing and sharing towels, utensils, cups, etc.
- Get an adequate amount of sleep.
- Eat well.

About the Flu: The UHS web site also provides information about the flu. Symptoms of the typical flu come on quickly and usually include fever, chills, weakness, aches and pains, headaches, and a dry cough. If you suddenly develop these symptoms at a time when influenza is present in the community,

you probably have the flu. Since flu is caused by viruses, antibiotics are not effective. The only real cure for flu is time. In cases of uncomplicated flu, the fever lasts three to four days and recovery occurs within a week. While most flu symptoms disappear within a week, a dry cough and lack of energy may persist for a couple of weeks. Once the worst symptoms have passed, it is especially important to eat and rest well so that full recovery takes place as quickly as possible.

ALCOHOL & DRUG USE

If you decide to drink while abroad, drink wisely. Alcohol abuse can lead to unsafe choices, poor academic performance, higher risk behavior, and/or regretted sexual activity. Do not endanger yourself, others, or property. You should use good judgment whenever consuming alcohol.

Students studying abroad may abuse alcohol due to a mistaken impression of how alcohol is used in your new surroundings, the cheaper cost to purchase alcohol, a lower minimum drinking age, different portions of alcohol, different types of alcoholic beverages, more lenient laws against drunkenness, and/or a desire to experiment or fit in. Although alcohol abuse may not carry the same legal penalties as use of illegal drugs, it can create dire circumstances for you and your personal safety.

Remember, you will be in a new environment and will often have to rely on public transportation to get you home at night. You may also have to make the journey home at night alone, so be sure to use caution and stay in control and aware of your surroundings. Use of inebriating or hallucinogenic drugs has very serious cultural and legal consequences (e.g., incarceration, deportation, removal from your program), as well as innumerable health risks.

Although there may be no minimum drinking age in your host country, the customs regarding alcohol use may be very different from ours. Most countries, with the exception of those with religious prohibitions, tolerate social drinking; however, alcohol abuse and drunken behavior are not socially acceptable or tolerated. Remember that you are serving as an ambassador for the University of Rochester and the United States and the rules of the University uphold while studying in another country.

If you or a fellow student becomes incapacitated due to alcohol overuse and/or is in need of medical attention, the local emergency medical service and your program director/faculty should be notified immediately to protect the student's health and well-being.

SEXUAL HEALTH

It is important for you to be aware of your host culture's view towards gender, dating, sex and morality. If you choose to be sexually active, protect yourself and your partner against unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS. Be responsible if using alcohol or other drugs because they can affect your judgment and your behavior.

Take a supply of condoms and other birth control methods with you, as the availability of condoms in your new country may be limited. Additionally, the conditions of manufacture and storage may be questionable. If you are taking birth control pills, bring an extra pack in addition to what will be needed for the duration of your stay.

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YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Living in a new place and culture can cause stresses that may or may not be anticipated. There will be ups and downs to adjusting to new academics, surroundings, food, habits, customs, people, etc. Feelings of loneliness or frustration will pass as you make these adjustments. If they persist, however, consider it a possible medical problem and seek assistance from a counselor or physician.

Going abroad is not a magic "geographic cure" for concerns and problems at home. Both physical and emotional health issues will follow you wherever you go. In particular, if you are concerned about your use of alcohol and other controlled drugs or if you have an emotional health concern, you should address it honestly before making plans to travel. Contrary to many people's expectations, travel does not minimize these problems; in fact, it often exacerbates them to a crisis stage while you are away from home.

Culture Shock

It is normal to experience stress when studying abroad. You are not only adjusting to being a student in a new and different setting, but you are also adjusting to a new living environment. Quite likely, you will be far away from friends and family and will experience feelings of loneliness and homesickness. These feelings are very natural. The difference between what you expect and what you actually experience may contribute to the level of distress you feel.

It may help to know that most people go through five fairly predictable stages as they adjust to their new environment.

- *Orientation and Honeymoon:* The initial excitement about being in a new place is called orientation & honeymoon.
- *Initial Culture Shock:* This stage is followed by a period of initial culture shock in which you may feel lonely, frustrated, and depressed.
- *Adjustment:* This stage will pass in time to a point of adjustment, where you will start feeling more comfortable with your surroundings and your acquaintances.
- *Integration:* As you complete the adjustment cycle, you will find yourself feeling integrated into the host culture and may find you enjoy most aspects of host country.
- *Reverse Culture Shock:* Returning to the United States may send you into a reverse culture shock. You may not want to leave and may find yourself trying to figure out how and when you can return.

Dealing with Stress

Many emotions and reactions are to be expected when you are stressed. Some common manifestations of stress are:

- Irritability over small things
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Queasy stomach
- Desire to run away
- Constant feeling of tiredness
- Psychosomatic illness
- Excessive criticism of others
- Poor work performance
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being unusually introspective
- Feelings of guilt, worry and anxiety

Ways to deal with stresses and strains of adjustment:

- Immerse yourself in study/reading that is satisfying.
- Find a local person with whom you can talk regularly.
- Practice your faith through prayer, meditation, reading, etc.
- Write letters/e-mails (or make audiotapes) to family and friends.
- Visit fellow students.

Coping Strategies

You may find it helpful to think about the coping strategies that have worked for you in the past. You may also want to develop some new strategies to help you when you are experiencing periods of loneliness, sadness, or depression. It helps to anticipate that you may have non-peak times, so you can be prepared to work through them.

Whenever your usual coping mechanisms are not working for you or you find yourself making coping choices that are not in your best interest, realize that you may need more support and seek help. You may find it helpful to talk with your program director/faculty to talk about the stress you are feeling.

You should be aware of the signs of a serious problem, either in yourself or in a fellow student, which require intervention. The signs include:

- Prolonged depression
- Marked changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Excessive anxiety that interferes with the ability to function
- Self-destructive or violent behavior
- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Failure to comply with medical recommendations

Adapted from "Maintaining Strong Mental and Emotional Health" module, Pre-Service Health Training for Volunteers Binder, [Peace Corps](#) Office of Medical Services