

Healthy and Organic Living

Healthy Hols by Nell Nelson published August 2008

Nell gives readers some helpful practical nutritional advice on how to avoid being ill on holiday.

You've booked your summer holiday, you've read the guidebooks, you've got the full spectrum of sun protection and you're just planning your wardrobe, but what about your health? A stomach upset, annoying insect bites, even a cold can put a dampener on your enjoyment. Luckily you can do more for your health, than just taking out an insurance policy and hoping for the best, here's some simple nutritional tips for happy healthy holidays.

A Month Before

The key to good health is having a healthy immune system, so you are well equipped to fight off any colds or viruses you could pick up on the plane and in unfamiliar surroundings. A strong immune system will also boost healing, so a tiny scratch from sea coral will heal quickly, lessening the chance of infection. Take a look at your diet and make sure you are eating lots of wholegrains, nuts, seeds, fruit and vegetables. Vitamin C is the single most important vitamin for the immune system so try and make sure you have some fresh fruit at breakfast, homemade vegetable soup at lunchtime and perhaps a filling salad in the evening and get in the habit of snacking on fresh fruit and carrot and red pepper sticks. Start taking a vitamin C tablet every day, if you feel you are not eating enough fruit and vegetables or if you feel under par. Cut back on processed, high fat foods as they can compromise your immune system as can smoking and alcohol. Stress is one of the main causes of impaired immunity as stress suppresses white blood cells and depletes body nutrients. A good way to manage stress is to do some kind of exercise everyday. Grains, especially wholegrains are rich in vitamin B which is nature's natural stress buster, so go for muesli and porridge in the morning and lots of brown rice, green leafy vegetables, oily fish and some dairy produce throughout the day. Get into the habit now, so when you are on holiday, these foods and exercise habit will seem commonplace.

Two Weeks To Go

Make yourself less popular with the mosquitoes; mozzies dislike bitter-tasting blood, so eat foods like chicory, endive and radicchio. But to be really sure start taking vitamin B1 (thiamine) as any excess is excreted through the skin, producing an odour undetectable to humans but repellent to mosquitoes. B vitamins are used by the body in a group, not in isolation, so start taking a B complex formula daily, plus a B1 tablet every day two weeks before you go away, as well as when you are on holiday to reduce the chance of getting mosquito and midge bites. The B vitamins may also help stress levels which in turn will reduce strain on the immune system.

Start taking probiotics to have your intestines in the best possible health to fight off any new bugs that you should encounter. Look for one with equal ratios of *L acidophilus*, *B bifidum* and *L bulgaricus* with strength of about 1.2 billion. Live yoghurt also contains some of these good bacteria,

so do enjoy at home and on holiday, but the tablets have such a large number of friendly bacteria, they won't all be destroyed by strong stomach acids.

One Day To Go – If You Are Flying

Eat high protein foods at breakfast and lunch such as a boiled egg and chicken and salad, then have a complex carbohydrate meal in the evening like wholemeal pasta and vegetables. Drink lots of water so you are well hydrated before you fly as flying itself is dehydrating. If you are flying at night, eat carbohydrates right before you get on a plane as they can make you feel sleepy. A good snack food to eat before and on a flight is bananas as they are rich in magnesium and potassium. Potassium can help lower blood pressure and magnesium is calming and they contain some melatonin which helps your body adjust to different time zones. Rather than relying on food on the plane or train, make some slow-release-energy snacks such as homemade flapjacks or muffins you can take with you. If that is just too much on your holiday checklist, buy some good oat-based cereal bars and take these for the journey instead, rather than be at the mercy of the fast food outlets at the station/airport.

D Day In The Air/On The Sea/On The Train

It is tempting when the trolley comes down the aisle of the plane to order a little gin and tonic, but alcohol is a stimulant and a diuretic and is even more disruptive when you are in a pressurised environment, so try and avoid alcohol, caffeine and high sugar products. Try and keep your blood sugar levels constant, so eat fresh and dried fruit, nuts, seeds, oatcakes or your flapjacks and muffins. Keep hydrated, don't wait till you feel thirsty, keep sipping water throughout the journey. If you are on ferry, add chunks of fresh ginger to hot water to help seasickness. If that is inconvenient, take ginger tablets with you. If you are prone to travel sickness, eat a light carbohydrate meal before travelling, such as cereal, toast, rice cakes or pasta, avoid greasy food and alcohol.

On Holiday

Adopt a regular meal and snack pattern to make sure you have enough energy to enjoy your holiday - try and have a carbohydrate and protein with each meal to ensure good sugar levels and avoid energy dips. If you suddenly feel tired, dried fruit, a dry biscuit or some nuts are good boosters. Don't reach for the fizzy drinks or chocolate as long term they will make you more tired. Keep hydrated as one of the most common reasons for fatigue is not having enough water, so make sure you always have a bottle of reliably sourced water to hand. Foods that are cooked on the spot are usually pretty safe, as cooking kills germs; it is food that is allowed to sit at room temperature that is the most dangerous, so street food can be ok, if you can see it being cooked in front of you such as banana fritters or hot potato crisps. Be wary of rice dishes as cooked rice tends to harbour germs. Avoid salads as they may have been washed in non-clean water and also drinks with ice unless you are eating somewhere where you can trust the ice and salad preparation. It is best to avoid fatty foods as they are harder to digest as are big meat dishes and spicy dishes can irritate the gut and cause discomfort.

Try and adjust to the local style of eating, as it will be suited to the country – Italy is the land of pasta which is great for energy-boosting sightseeing. Many northern European countries have bread and cheese for breakfast, this protein carbohydrate combo will give you far more energy than a bowl of cornflakes. If you go to Asia, embrace noodle soups for breakfast – they are a great source of energy and also good to have fluid and salts in a hot country.

Take a few drops of grapefruit seed extract everyday in clean safe water or one capsule per day to ward off any infections and stomach upsets. Grapefruit seed extract has broad anti bacterial activity and is also anti fungal so may also help prevent travellers' diarrhoea.

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If It All Goes Wrong

Diarrhoea - eat a bland diet of dry toast, crackers, biscuits, bananas and avoid alcohol, dairy and fatty foods. Drink lots of bottled water to avoid becoming dehydrated

Constipation – try and increase your fibre with washed fruit and vegetables with the skin on - use grapefruit seed extract to wash the skin. Pulses and grains are good for boosting your fibre intake. Keep drinking water, to prevent stools getting harder to pass. Avoid low fibre foods like French bread, pastries and croissants.

Sunburn - drink lots of water. Soak a cloth in cold whole milk and apply carefully onto the burned skin and leave it for 15 minutes to 20 minutes, then wash with cold water. Cold tea without sugar or even better chamomile tea applied to sunburnt skin can ease the pain.

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What To Pack

A sturdy water bottle, fill the empty bottle up on the airplane to make sure you are constantly hydrated and fill up from reputable sources – i.e. hotel filtered water

Snacks – dried fruit, nuts and seeds for energy boosts if mealtimes are irregular, dry biscuits like rich tea or digestive biscuits for upset stomachs

Teabags – peppermint, good to have after a meal to aid digestion or to take when feel a bit off colour and can't face food. Chamomile tea is good if you suffer from bloating and can help you wind down and sleep. The cooled used teabags can also be used to soothe sunburnt skin.

Supplements: Vitamin B1, vitamin B complex, vitamin C, grapefruit seed extract, acidophilus tablets, fresh ginger or ginger tablets for seasickness.

When Your Holiday Is Over

If you feel ill or experience bloating, fatigue and stomach pains, it is worth checking with your doctor in case you have picked up a parasite on holiday. Keep taking the acidophilus tablets for about two weeks and keep on eating immune boosting foods and enjoy your good holiday health.