

Letter to Amazon Workshop Participants from Dr. Linnea Smith

October 2010

Travelers to the Explorama lodges sometimes ask me for advice regarding which medicines they should have had before they came here, and which medicines they should have brought with them. Although I am happy to answer those questions, by the time you're here, it's a little late! So, for those who like to plan ahead:

First, a few general comments, and a disclaimer: remember that advice is only that. Entire books are written on the pros and cons of various regimens, and I can give only a brief overview here. Furthermore, each person is different, and **you MUST talk with your doctor at home well before leaving**. Not only can your personal physician answer many of your questions, he or she can also tailor medicines and vaccines for your personal needs, especially if you have special needs, e.g., if you are diabetic, have any other chronic illness (including HIV or AIDS), are pregnant, are traveling with young children, etc.

Also bear in mind that NO vaccine and NO prophylaxis (both strategies to prevent an illness from occurring, as opposed to taking treatment once you are ill) is perfect. Neither vaccine nor prophylactic medicines can guarantee that you will not get the illness you are trying to avoid; what these measures do is to improve your odds. Furthermore, all vaccines and all medicines have economic costs, and all carry the possibility of reactions or side effects. So, what you need to do is to balance the risks of an illness (including the likelihood of getting the illness in question); with the risks/costs of trying to prevent the illness. For instance, a backpacker in Nepal is at higher risk for intestinal illnesses than a tourist to Explorama, therefore the backpacker might be more likely to take prophylactic steps. This is an issue to discuss with your doctor at home.

Finally, remember to carry in your hand luggage (NEVER in a checked suitcase which even in the best of worlds occasionally goes to a different place than you do) all prescription or other medicine which will be needed while traveling. Insulin-dependent diabetics are (strongly) advised to carry an extra supply of insulin in their suitcases (or even better, in the hand luggage of a traveling partner) to replace the bottle which will inevitably be left behind in a hotel or dropped overboard from a boat. This advice goes for any other item (including glasses) without which you would be utterly lost, as there are no K-Marts nearby where you can purchase replacements. In addition, everyone should carry a WRITTEN list of all medicines they are taking, as well as any allergies or medical conditions you might have. (This precaution applies in the U.S., too -- it doesn't matter if you know all the medicines you are taking, should you happen to have been knocked unconscious and therefore be unable to pass this important information to the physicians attempting to care for you.)

Occasionally, people read about dengue fever, and become very concerned. Dengue is a viral illness transmitted by mosquitoes. There is some dengue fever in this area, although it is more common in certain parts of Iquitos than it is in the rainforest. There is no vaccine or prophylactic medicine available, and no treatment other than supportive care, should you contract dengue. However, the risk is small, the illness generally passes in a week or so (lurid accounts of dengue in the novels I have read often exaggerate its dramatic impact-- I have had dengue myself, and it is like a bad bout of "the flu"). The truth is, no one is completely safe anywhere. Back home in the U.S., you are at risk for West Nile virus, hantaviruses, St. Louis encephalitis, and others, not to mention motor vehicle accidents. Life comes with no guarantees except the classic two, but generally speaking, Peru is a safe and easy country for "adventure travel," as well as being a beautiful place, with warm and friendly people.

Now, what you really want to hear about ... shots!

-- Probably the most important item is an update on your **tetanus** (usually a dT, or diphtheria-tetanus, or nowadays, maybe a Tdap -- again, your physician at home can tell you which is best for you) , if you have not had one in the last five to ten years, and assuming you have not previously had an allergic reaction to this vaccine. This advice applies equally if you are traveling or if you never leave home.

-- I advise **ONE polio booster**, one time in your life, for anyone traveling to any developing country. This does not have to be repeated for each trip.

-- There is now a vaccine against **hepatitis A**, which is given in two doses and which provides lifetime protection. Hepatitis A is present in the U.S. as well as in most other places in the world. There is also a vaccine, in three doses, against **Hepatitis B**. Both of these are rapidly being added to the list of vaccines that everyone in the U.S. receives as a child, whether they plan to travel or not. This is another decision to make with your doctor at home.

-- There is a vaccine to protect against **yellow fever**, a disease with a high fatality rate. It seldom strikes tourists, but is a terrible disease if you should happen to get it, it does occur in Peru, and the vaccine is good for ten years. The risk of tourists falling prey to this virus is very low, but there is no point in taking chances, so I do recommend this vaccine. (Incidentally, the yellow International Vaccine Card which you will receive from the clinic which gives you this shot should be carried along with your passport in your hand luggage.)

-- There are vaccines available for cholera and typhoid, but they are for diseases that you as a tourist to Explorama are unlikely to get, and in the case of the cholera vaccine, of only marginal effectiveness. Do watch what you eat and drink -- no uncooked fruits or vegetables except those you peel yourself, no fruit drinks in the market or ice cubes made of water of whose origin you are ignorant, avoid nibbling at every stand in the market. The exception to this rule is at Explorama's lodges, where all foods, cooked or raw, are carefully prepared and should give you no trouble. (If you are an adventurer and plan to sample foods in markets and out-of-the way places, the typhoid vaccine might be a good idea.)

-- **Malaria**. There has been malaria in this region for the last decade and a half. It is not terribly prevalent, and only rarely affects tourists, but I would recommend that you take prophylaxis. There are a number of medicines available for this purpose, but whatever you take should be effective against chloroquine-resistant malaria. Again, this is a topic which you need to discuss with your personal physician. Bear in mind also that this medication must be started as much as a week before coming to the Amazon, so don't put it off till the very last minute. The medicine also needs to be continued after leaving the rainforest, so follow your doctor's instructions -- he/she did not prescribe more pills than you need!

Remember also that malaria is passed to people by mosquitoes, and they can only give you malaria if they are carrying it themselves, and only if they bite you. There is NO person-to-person transmission. This means that you help yourself by wearing protective clothing, using insect repellents, and sleeping under mosquito nets (provided at all Explorama lodges except Ceiba Tops where there are air-conditioned rooms with glass windows).

-- Travelers' diarrhea is a problem of relatively minor proportions, which affects somewhere between five and ten per cent of the people who come to Peru from the U.S. It is generally short-lived and resolves spontaneously (i.e., without treatment), usually within two or three days and sometimes within one day. I do not recommend antibiotics for prevention, but they can be used to shorten the duration of illness, should it occur. The usual treatment is for three days, but one good dose of a fluoroquinolone may be effective (again, discuss this with your doctor at home; this, and azithromycin which is now preferred by some docs, are prescription medicines). The Imodium or Lomotil which you brought along may be very helpful if you are embarking on an expedition where a bathroom may not be readily available (a jungle hike, a day in the airport), but remember that if you use such medicines indiscriminately, you may be constipated for the rest of your trip!

If you are one of the people who gets diarrhea every time you go more than 20 miles from home, you might want to take Pepto-Bismol (two tablets four times a day) as prophylaxis. Read the box to be sure that you are not taking other medications which might interact with it. **More questions?** I can be found at the dinner table at the Explorama Lodge, as a rule, or if not there, then in the "Clinica Yanamono." Feel free to ask! (I can respond to e-mails when I go to the city to run errands, usually about twice a month; so be patient if you contact me by that route.)

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