

How to assemble the perfect travel first aid kit

By Erik McLaughlin



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Preparing your travel medical kit is a vital part of your pre-trip planning and packing. When I think about getting ready for a trip it usually involves packing. This means all my clothes laid out on the bed, some Bob Marley music in the background and deciding what I will need. What I need has to be balanced with space and weight. This is true with your first aid kit.

The perfect kit

The perfect travel first aid kit is the kit that is carried with you and ready for any potential problem. If you talk to too many travel doctors, you will end up with a first aid kit that weighs between 30 and 50 kilograms and will likely require its own suitcase. This is not something that you will easily carry and consequently it will be left in your hotel room. The travel kit will not do you or your companions any good there! A small, portable kit with the essentials should be carried with you at all times and a slightly larger kit left in the suitcases or hotel room can be used to “re-supply” your smaller, portable kit.

When designing a travel first aid kit, I look at several factors. First, what are the pre-existing medical needs of the travellers? Second, how long are they going to be travelling for? Third, where are they going? Last, what are they going to be doing? Let’s take a look at these needs, one by one.

Pre-existing medical conditions

Travellers with chronic medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, thyroid disorders or other problems that need regular mediation fall into this category. I also like to place people with known histories of allergic reactions here. It is vital to remember to carry enough of your home medications with you on your trip. This saves the need to spend your “fun time” having to find a local pharmacy and sort out a new prescription and sometimes even worry if you are getting counterfeit medications! I always advise to carry enough medication for your trip plus ½ again as much. So for a 2 week trip, you should carry 3 weeks of medicine. This gives you some freedom if you find that perfect beach and want to extend your trip or have a delay with travel and want to be stress-free. Your home medications should be carried in 2 separate locations. Some should be in your carry-on bag and some should be in your luggage (as long as it’s not temperature sensitive). This allows you freedom if your luggage is lost or your bag falls into a river. Lastly, carrying a copy of your prescription is a good idea. If things go bad and you find yourself out of medication, this copy will help the doctor in your host country write the prescription so that you can get the refill from a local pharmacy.

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Photo by Michael Faes, Freemages.com

How long is the trip?

Carrying two band-aids for a month long hiking trip is not wise. Make sure you have enough first aid supplies for the duration of your trip. This may seem like common sense but only having two tablets of pain reliever will not do much good if you are gone for 3 weeks.

Where are you going?

Travellers headed to different parts of the world have different health-related needs. Mosquito repellent is probably not needed on a trip to the Arctic Circle. Consequently, high-altitude medicine will just be extra weight on a trip to the beach. This concept is especially important when looking at the local diseases the travellers may face. I am especially talking about malaria and other insect carried illnesses.

If you are going to the tropics, make sure you have considered insect bite precautions and anti-malaria medications. If you are going to a high altitude area like Machu Picchu you should consider medicine for altitude sickness. I also place my insect bite prevention supplies in with the first aid kit as this is a vital part of staying healthy while travelling.

This is also a good time to look at your access to healthcare. Are you going to be in a remote Amazon village or backpacking through the mountains, far from medical care? Are you going to be in the downtown region of a capital city? The more remote you are planning to be means you will need to be more self-sufficient and possibly go longer without being able to re-supply your kit.

What are you going to do?

The activities planned on the trip are key in helping build an appropriate travel first aid kit. A hiking trip in the mountains has different needs than lying on the beach or shopping in a capital city. A trip that will be heavy on walking, whether it is shopping or hiking should carry a bit more supplies designed to care for your feet. This should include blister care and treatment supplies. A trip with a lot of time in the sun should go a bit heavier on the sunscreen.

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The basics

Regardless of where you are going or what you are doing, there are a few basics that should be found in every first aid kit.

- Your personal medications (carry prescription copies).
- Pain control/fever reducer (acetaminophen, ibuprofen, paracetamol, etc.).
- Allergy medication (Benadryl, antihistamines, etc.).
- Assortment of Band-Aids (for small cuts and scrapes).
- Mole skin or blister care (for blisters on the feet).
- Gauze (various sizes to clean and dress wounds).
- Electrolyte solution or powder (to rehydrate with traveller's diarrhea).
- Antibiotic ointment (for small cuts and scrapes).
- Sunscreen (no matter where you go).

Often times this small amount of first aid gear can fit within a small container and should be carried with you in your coat pocket or daypack. As you use items from this small kit, replace them from your larger kit kept in your hotel room.

More remote areas

For travellers headed to more remote areas or looking to be a bit more self-sufficient there are some extras you should place into your kit. Some of the basics include:

- SAM splint (for sprains or stabilization of injured limbs).
- Antimalarials (talk with your travel doctor about which type).
- Anti-diarrheal (talk with your travel doctor about when to use this).
- Broad spectrum antibiotics (again, discuss this with your doctor).
- Blood clotting agents (CeloX, Quik-Clot that can be bought in most outdoor stores).
- Sling/bandana (for injured arms or as a dust mask, etc.).

Putting it all together

Probably the only mistake a traveller can make with their first aid kit is not having one. There are many commercially available kits to be purchased or you can assemble one from scratch. A bit of pre-planning can go a long way towards dealing with an unexpected injury or illness while on your adventure.

Travel safe! 