

Humanitarian Aid Workers



If you are traveling overseas to provide aid—such as disaster relief or missionary work—you may face more health risks than regular tourists. You may be more exposed to the local population and have less-secure lodgings. If you are traveling in the aftermath of a natural disaster, you may have to contend with floodwater, debris, or other hazards. However, since you are an aid worker, it is especially critical to protect your health. If you become sick or injured, not only will you be unable to provide aid, you will also add to the burden of the local health care system. With careful preparation, however, you can minimize the risks to your health.

Pre-Travel Care

As soon as possible, schedule a visit with a travel medicine specialist, who can provide vaccines, medicines, and advice on how to stay safe and healthy while you are traveling. You should also plan a visit with your regular doctor to make sure you're physically fit for the demands of the work. If you'll be gone for a long time, a dental check-up before you leave is a good idea as well.

Aid work can be demanding, and medical facilities in disaster areas are often strained or nonexistent. Therefore, if you have a serious chronic illness, such as heart disease or diabetes, or are pregnant, consider whether there are other ways for you to support the cause.

Avoiding Injury in a Disaster Area

Injuries and motor vehicle accidents are common risks anywhere in the world, so select safe transportation and always wear a seatbelt. Be sensitive to possible physical dangers, such as debris, unstable buildings, and downed power lines. In a conflict area, be aware of landmines or other explosive hazards.

What to Pack

Humanitarian aid workers often need to pack more than other travelers, especially if they are going to be in an area where supplies are limited and the water supply is compromised. In addition to your travel health kit, consider whether you might need any of the following:



- First-aid supplies
- Water filter or purification tablets
- Nonperishable food
- Gloves (rubber or leather)
- Bed net (in areas with malaria)
- Extra pair of prescription glasses
- Toilet paper
- Sewing kit
- Laundry detergent
- Flashlight and spare batteries
- Candles and matches or lighter
- Zip-top bags
- Safety goggles

Humanitarian aid work is stressful, and taking along a personal item, such as a family photo, can be comforting. You should also bring photocopies of important documents, such as your passport and medical license.

When You Return

Seek medical care if you were injured during your trip or become ill after returning. Make sure your doctor knows that you recently returned from doing humanitarian aid work overseas. More than 30% of aid workers report depression after returning home, so take time to rest and readjust. If you continue to feel depressed, you may wish to seek counseling.