



Swedish Civil
Contingencies
Agency

Staying healthy

on overseas missions with MSB



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This folder intends to give you brief information on health related risks and how to avoid them working in overseas operations. It is complementary to information provided in the induction course and at the pre-deployment briefing. You can use it to remind yourself of how to prevent illness and how to manage some health problems that can occur during mission.

Checklist

<input type="checkbox"/>	The Yellow Book (International Vaccination Certificate) – keep a copy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Malaria prophylaxis if recommended
<input type="checkbox"/>	Insurance card from Kammarkollegiet
<input type="checkbox"/>	Emergency phone numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cash in US dollar or Euro
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medical kit & personal medications
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sun cream & head protection
<input type="checkbox"/>	Hand disinfection
<input type="checkbox"/>	Insect repellent
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mosquito net if in a mosquito area
<input type="checkbox"/>	Blood group - keep a copy

Get prepared

Prior to departure, it is recommended that you search information on health related aspects in the area where you will be working, including climate, infectious diseases, access to safe water and food and medical resources. As a first priority when arriving to your duty station you should always get prepared for what to do in case of emergency medical situations.



En Route

Jet lag

Jet lag occurs when you are on a long haul flight and have to pass through different time zones. Generally it takes one day per every hour of time difference to recover. While on flight, avoid alcohol and caffeine-heavy beverages, set the watch to the destination time and try to eat and sleep according to your synchronized time. Upon arrival, try to stay awake until night time as it might help your body to adjust faster.

DVT

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a blood clot that can develop in a deep vein usually in the thigh or calf. The risk increase if the flight is more than 6–8h. During the flight, try to move around, do exercise while sitting in the chair – bend and straighten your legs/feet/toes and arms. Drink a lot of water and avoid alcohol as it dehydrates you. Avoid sleeping pills and try to make sure you are as comfortable as possible.

Acclimatization

The need for acclimatization should not be underestimated. Our bodies need to adapt to new climates, food, and culture and as described below altitude. This process takes time and, in general terms, it can take up to a week before you function to your optimum; hence, take it easy the first days.

Altitude

High-altitude illness (HAI) results when hypoxic stress outstrips acclimatization. HAI can occur at any altitude above 2100 m but is particularly common above 2750 m. Susceptibility is primarily genetic, but fast rates of ascent and higher sleeping altitudes are important precipitating factors. The spectrum of HAI includes common acute mountain sickness (AMS), occasional high-altitude pulmonary oedema and, rarely, high altitude cerebral oedema. The latter two conditions, although uncommon, are potentially fatal. AMS may occur after 1–12 hour at high altitude. Headache is followed by anorexia, nausea, insomnia, fatigue and lassitude.

Preventive measures

- Avoid one-day travel to sleeping altitudes over 2750 m, if possible. Break the journey for at least one night at 2000–2500 m.
- Avoid overexertion and alcohol for the first 24h at altitude; drink extra water.
- If direct travel to sleeping altitude over 2750 m is unavoidable, consult your medic or medical coordinator for advice.

Travelers with the following symptoms should seek medical attention when experiencing, at altitude:

- Symptoms of AMS that are severe or last longer than 2 days: progressive shortness of breath with cough and fatigue; ataxia or altered mental status.

Environmental Health

Hygiene

- Wash your hands before handling food.
- Wash your hands after going to the toilet.
- Rinse fruits and vegetables in clean water.
- Wash and sanitize all surfaces and equipment used for food preparation.
- Protect kitchen areas and food from insects, pests and other animals.
- Separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods during storage and handling.
- Use separate equipment and utensils such as knives and cutting boards for handling raw foods.

Preventive measures: Beverages and food

Eat only

- Pasteurized dairy products.
- Fruit and vegetables that you have washed in clean water or have peeled yourself.
- Hard-boiled eggs.
- Food that is cooked and served hot.

Drink only

- Water that has been disinfected.
- Ice made with bottled or disinfected water.
- Hot coffee or tea.
- Milk if pasteurized.

Travellers' Diarrhoea (TD)

Food and water is the most common source of gastro intestinal diseases (diarrhea). About 50% of travelers to tropical countries get diarrhea. Make sure that you only drink safe water. Tap water might be purified in different ways, such as boiling, UV light, ceramic filtration or chemical disinfection. For chemical disinfection iodine, chlorine dioxide, or chlorine are common agents. In most settings purified water is also available at the local market. Make sure to find a brand that has been quality assured. Food should preferably be peeled, thoroughly washed in purified water or freshly cooked. Most bacteria die if they are heated ($>70^{\circ}\text{C}/158^{\circ}\text{F}$). Food should be stored at cold temperatures. Deep frozen food is however not necessarily safe, as it does not kill bacteria's in already contaminated food, which is why you should avoid ice cream and ice.



Photo: Marie Jenneteg.

Bug bites

Mosquitos, ticks and flies can spread a number of diseases as for example Malaria; many of these cannot be prevented with vaccines or medicine. Please note that, several types of mosquitos bite both during night and day, and often live around buildings in urban areas. Mosquitos are not usually seen at altitudes above 1500 m. Sand flies are discrete small insects with poor ability to fly, but can nevertheless be a nuisance. Bites commonly occur on the lower legs and ankles, and can be very itchy and create wounds that become infected.

Preventive measures

- Cover exposed skin by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and hats.
- Use an appropriate insect repellent, DR1-Salitidin or products containing any of the following: DEET, Picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus, IR3535.
- If possible use permethrin-treated clothing and gear. Do not use permethrin directly on the skin.
- If possible stay and sleep in air-conditioned or screened rooms.
- Use a bed net/mozzie-dome if the area where you sleep is exposed to the outdoors.
- Do not walk barefoot.

Diseases acquired through close contact with local animal

Even though most animals fear and avoid people, they may attack if they feel threatened, especially if they feel that their young or territory is at risk. A simple scratch or a bite from an animal can lead to serious diseases such as rabies.

Preventive measures

- Do not touch or feed any animals that you do not know.
- Do not allow animals to lick open wounds, and do not get animal saliva in your eyes or mouth.
- Avoid rodents and bats, their urine and faeces.
- Keep clean around buildings, leave no debris near the house, keep grass cut short.
- Keep garbage in closed containers; garbage attracts pests! A tidy environment will not only keep rodents away, it will also minimize the likelihood of snake encounters, remember; snakes feed on rodents.

Post exposure measures

- Wash the wound with soap and clean water.
- If you are bitten by a snake; try to calm down, panic will spread the poison more rapidly in your circulation. Immobilize the bitten limb, stay still and call for assistance/advice. DO NOT put on a compression bandage or tourniquet!
- Seek medical advice immediately.

Snakes, spiders and scorpions

Snakes fear and avoid humans, but does bite if they feel threatened. Snakebites are rare among humanitarian aid workers, and not always dangerous. Use sturdy rubber or leather boots when walking in unknown terrain. Let somebody with more experience lead the way, and make noise as you walk to give the snake a chance to escape.

Travellers should be aware of the local species of spiders, scorpions and snakes, which can deliver bites/stings that can cause allergic reactions, and envenomation with serious consequences.

Preventive measures (scorpions, spiders and snakes)

- Do not handle or disturb these animals.
- Always shake out shoes, sleeping bags, and clothing before use.
- Never walk barefoot, wear shoes or boots.
- Avoid sleeping on the ground.
- Seal gaps on windows and doors.
- Wear gloves when handling rocks, crates and lumber or moving material that have been in contact with the ground.
- Scorpions, spiders and solpugids found on your body should be brushed off, not swatted.

Infectious diseases/ Sexual transmitted diseases

Diseases, as for example HIV and Hepatitis B/C infection can be spread through body fluids, such as saliva, blood, vomit, and semen.

Protect yourself:

- Use condoms correctly.
- Do not inject drugs.
- Limit alcohol consumption. People take more risks when intoxicated.
- Do not share needles or any devices that can break the skin. That includes needles for tattoos, piercings, and acupuncture.
- If you receive medical or dental care, make sure the equipment is disinfected or sanitized.

Climate

Heat

Sudden changes in temperature and humidity may have adverse effects on health. Exposure to high temperature results in loss of water and electrolytes (salts) and may lead to heat exhaustion and heat stroke. In hot dry conditions, dehydration is particularly likely to develop unless care is taken to maintain adequate fluid intake. The addition of a little table salt to food can help to prevent heat exhaustion, particularly during the period of adaptation. Travelers should drink enough fluid to be able to maintain usual urine production.

Heat-related illnesses

Heat rash, or prickly heat, occurs when blocked sweat glands become inflamed. This painful rash reduces the body's ability to sweat and to tolerate heat.

Heat cramps are painful spasms of the muscles. The muscles used in doing the work are most susceptible. The spasms are caused by the failure of the body to replace its lost body salts and usually occur after heavy sweating.

Heat exhaustion results when the body loses large amounts of fluid by sweating during work in hot environments. The skin becomes cool and clammy. Symptoms include profuse sweating, weakness, dizziness, nausea, and headaches.

First aid for heat exhaustion:

- Get medical aid. Stay with the person until help arrives.
- Move to a cooler, shaded location.
- Remove as many clothes as possible (including socks and shoes).
- Apply cool, wet cloths or ice to head, face or neck. Spray with cool water.
- Encourage the person to drink water, clear juice, or a sports drink.

Heat stroke is the most serious condition and requires immediate medical attention. The body temperature becomes very high. Complete or partial loss of consciousness is possible. Sweating is not a good symptom of heat stress as there are two types of heat stroke -- «classical» where there is little or no sweating, and «exertional» where body temperature rises because of strenuous exercise or work and sweating is usually present.

First aid for heat stroke:

- Call the emergency number immediately. Heat stroke is a medical emergency.
- Stay with the person until help arrives.
- Move to a cooler, shaded location.
- Remove as many clothes as possible (including socks and shoes).
- Wet the person's skin and clothing with cool water.
- Apply cold, wet cloths or ice to head, face, neck, armpits, and groin.
- Do not try to force the person to drink.

Cold

A cold environment challenges the worker in three ways: by air temperature, air movement (wind speed), and humidity (wetness). In order to work safely, these challenges have to be counterbalanced by proper insulation (layered protective clothing), by physical activity and by controlled exposure to cold (work/rest schedule). Please, note that the wind-chill factor must be taken into account when working in cold weather/windy situations. The risk for frost bite and hypothermia increases exponentially with falling temperature and increasing wind, as for example a temperature of -25°C at a wind speed of 20km/h will be perceived as a temperature of -37°C in light wind. Bright sunshine will to some extent reduce the effect of wind chill, but precautions must still be taken.

Cold-related illnesses

Hypothermia: Body temperature drops from the normal 37°C to 35°C or below.

- Mild symptoms: Alert but shivering.
- Moderate to severe symptoms: Shivering stops, confusion, slurred speech, heart rate & breathing slow, loss of consciousness; death.

Frostbite: Body tissues freeze, e.g., hands and feet. Can occur at temperatures above freezing, due to wind chill. May result in amputation.

- Symptoms: numbness, reddened skin develops gray/white patches, feels firm/hard, and may blister.

Preventive measures

- Know the symptoms; monitor yourself and co-workers.
- Drink warm, sweetened fluids (no alcohol).
- Dress properly:
 - Layers of loose-fitting, insulating clothes
 - Insulated jacket, gloves, and a hat (waterproof, if necessary)
 - Insulated and waterproof boots.

First Aid for cold related illnesses

- Move the casualty to protected area (warm place) change to dry clothes, cover with blankets/and wind breaker.
- Give warm and sweetened drinks if alert, apply heat packs to armpits, neck and groin.
- Do not rub on frostbitten areas, do not walk on frostbitten feet, do not “aggressively” rewarm frostbitten area unless directed to do so by medical personnel.

Personal health

Mental & Psychosocial Health

Work as a field staff is often a stressful experience. While abroad, you will have to face separation from family and friends, immerse yourself in new organizational and cultural context, and deal with threats to your health and safety. Remember that high levels of stress may result in physical, behavioral and psychological problems, hence allow yourself to ventilate your feelings and emotions with entrusted co-workers and support staff. It is better to acknowledge that there is a problem at an early stage than letting it get out of hand, by ignoring or suppressing your problems.

Adjusting and adapting to a new context is a challenging process that takes time. In the beginning there is excitement and fascination about the new context, followed by the realization of the challenges and the need to adapt. The difficult times of the adjustment could lead to increased stress symptoms.

Persevering through, you'll develop skills that would allow you to function and enjoy your mission. However, if you are feeling overwhelmed do not hesitate to consult the MSB staff counselor. On well-established missions there is commonly an organized Peer Support system in operation. Peers supporters are trained volunteers that will support you if you need assistance with psychosocial matters or mild crisis reactions. They will also be able to refer you to professional help if needed.

Please note that if you find yourself in a dysfunctional mission or you experiencing discriminations, harassment or any other type of inappropriate behavior, report back to headquarters and ask for assistance!

Alcohol

Field staff often resort to alcohol in order to alleviate stress. Although alcohol is permitted in many contexts, the overuse is regarded as a maladaptive coping strategy. Any perceived benefits are short-lived

and instead you risk falling into unhealthy lifestyle. If you consume alcohol, be mindful and keep track of your intake. Increased alcohol consumption could indicate high levels of stress. In that case, get in touch MSB staff counselor for help.

Rest and recovery

Make sure you get enough time to rest and sleep: if you are well rested you will be able to tackle challenges and handle stress much better. Try to create, to the extent possible, the optimal sleeping conditions: a dark, cool and quiet room.

- Sometimes relaxation music can be helpful to create a peace of mind before going to bed, but do stay away from computer screens before going to bed!

Relaxation/meditation

There are many different techniques when it comes to relaxation and meditation, and what works for you may not work for your colleague, simply look for different methods on the internet and ask for advice from your MSB staff counselor if you need assistance. Below you will find a few simple exercises that can be helpful to you in the field.

Breathing exercise:

- Sit yourself comfortably on a chair in a quiet room, sit straight and close your eyes while doing this so called 4-7-8 exercise.
- Inhale through your nose for a count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale through your mouth for a count of eight.
- Repeat at least four times.

Creating a Symbol of Relaxation

It can be useful, in terms of practicing relaxation, to choose an image that conveys a sensation of peace, comfort, and/or mental and physical letting go. Choose any image of your liking, a favorite place in nature as for example the seashore, forest or mountainside, or simply a color or the face of someone you like.

Whenever you feel the need for a relaxation exercise, call up that image as you are becoming more relaxed. Let the symbol grow and fill your awareness, and let the qualities of that symbol come to mind, and imagine them moving through your body to the rhythm of your breath. As you practice, you will be able to close your eyes anywhere, and relax rapidly, simply by calling up your symbol and letting it fill your awareness for a few minutes.

Physical fitness

Situation

As we often find ourselves in environments where it is hard to get outside, or movements are restricted, we need to develop strategies to work out at home. Below you will find a simple work out that can be done completely without any gym equipment, all you need is a bag or something that holds a weight of a few kilos. Use your imagination when it comes to developing training devices; as for example an inner tube from a car tire can be filled with sand and become a Bulgarian training bag. Why not bring a skipping rope from home?

Make training part of you daily routine

When you are away from home on mission, you often find yourself in a situation where work takes over, and once you have time of you just want to relax. Find a time during the day that works the best for you, as for example going up early in the morning to do a simple work out will prevent you from skipping training once the work day is finished and you are tired.

Make the best you can of your meals

Maybe you end up on a location where you are eating out more than you would normally do, or have little access to good quality ingredients. Sometimes making the extra effort of talking to the locals and ask for their assistance in getting hold of fresh produce can make a huge difference, do however use local food with caution, i.e. follow strict hygiene routines, wash with clean water and cook properly. If possible and at your preference eat with your colleagues and take turns cooking healthy meals. Try to create a calm and comfortable situation around your meals; light a candle now and then.

Pair up with a colleague

Self-motivation is hard for most of us; hence, teaming up with a partner when it comes to training (and coping with everyday matters) is a very good idea. This strategy will be beneficial for both of you: when your motivation is failing you, your friend will encourage you and vice versa.

Exercise: confined spaces

The simple exercises below will take very little of your time and will most likely be a nice break in your daily routines. Please, do search the internet for variation in your training.

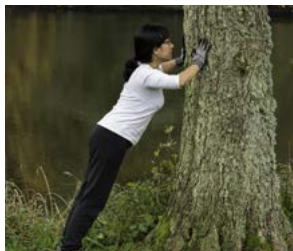
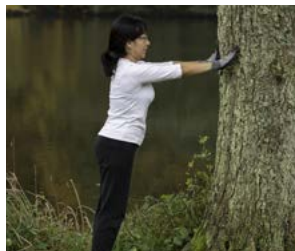
Always start with a warm-up, at a minimum of 3-5 minutes, alternate with jumping jacks, rope jumping, lunges, and push up. If available use the stairs in your building, by simply going up and down rapidly for a few minutes.

Once you are warm, set your watch or other timing device for 15 minutes, and do as many full circuits as you can muster in that time. As your fitness level develops add repetitions or sets as you see fit, and of course you can move on to push-ups on the ground, and add more weight etc.

20 body weight squats



15 incline push ups



10 one-arm luggage rows (each arm)



10 reverse crunches



Alternative types of push-ups



In case of illness/ emergency

Safety equipment

Use whatever safety equipment you have been issued, related to the level of risk at your destination, i.e. if you are working in a high risk environment do not skimp on using body armor, helmet, sturdy boots and safety glasses as per instruction from Security Management.

Medical kit

Know your medical kit, if unfamiliar ask your medical officer/nurse to explain and demonstrate. Keep in reach for easy access.

Trauma/sexual assault (PEP-kit)

Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) is an emergency medical response kit that can be used to protect individuals exposed to the HIV virus. PEP treatment consists of preventive medications, a day-after pill, laboratory tests and counseling. Personnel that have been exposed to trauma and/or sexual assault and/ or blood transfusion are the primary target groups for this package. Ensure that you know who the custodian of this kit on your duty station is.

Medical assistance and MEDEVAC Plan

Find out where to go in case you get sick, know the **Medevac Plan** and bring a medical travel kit including all medicines you need on a daily basis. Pharmacies do often not have adequate stocks, and the quality is likely to vary, of medicine and even routine medicine can be difficult to obtain. The facilities in operation do generally not meet international standards. Facilities often apply outdated and poorly maintained diagnostic and treatment

equipment's. Furthermore, local medical staff is often not adequately trained in the latest techniques, apart from basic care. Also be aware that a very low English proficiency may complicate medical treatment further. Due to these conditions, a medical air evacuation to another country might be required in the event of serious illness or injury.

Never hesitate to consult your medical office or the MSB medical coordinator if anything is unclear regarding health aspects of your mission.



In case of emergency: Always make sure that the MSB Duty Officer and Falck Global Assistance are informed!

Prepare yourself before making the call:

- Who are you and where are you calling from?
- How can you be contacted?
- What has happened?
- What measures have been taken on scene/
or will be taken?
- What type of support do you need?

Contact Details

MSB Medical Coordinator

E-mail: medical.coordinator@msb.se

MSB Staff Counselor

Email: staff.counselor@msb.se

MSB Switch board

Phone: +46 (0) 771-240 240

Duty Officer 24/7

Phone: +46 (0) 54-150 150

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