

Respiratory Infections

Traveling abroad can make you susceptible to respiratory infections. Most respiratory infections begin as viral infections of the nose and throat—what we think of as the common cold. Ordinarily, we can fight off these infections within a few days. However, under the stress of travel or living in a developing country, or changing many time zones, our immune system can also be under stress. Travelers with respiratory infections accounted for 25% of our medical practice when I practiced in Nepal.

There is no specific treatment for a cold in its early stages, and giving antibiotics early in the course of a cold has no value, either in treating the current infection, or preventing a complication, such as sinusitis or bronchitis. However, the virus that causes the common cold is almost always gone within seven days. At that point, if your cold is getting worse instead of better, or simply not improving, taking an antibiotic can be a big help.

Persistent sinus symptoms and cough that result from a common cold are almost always caused by bacteria that live full time in your nose and throat. The viruses that cause colds can allow these bacteria to move into your sinuses or lungs and set up their own infection. That's why antibiotics can be of benefit after the virus is gone—it is now the bacteria that are causing the problems.

A convenient antibiotic to carry in case of a prolonged cold is **azithromycin 500 mg (Zithromax)**. If you decide to treat your persistent respiratory infection, take **one pill per day for three days**. Remember to wait at least 6-7 days after your cold begins before starting the antibiotic. If you suspect pneumonia—a serious lung infection associated with fever—seek medical advice as soon as you can.

Skin Infections

When traveling it is possible to get severe bacterial skin infections from minor skin wounds, such as a bug bite or minor scratch. Although this is relatively rare, it can be very uncomfortable, and require treatment with antibiotics. If you develop swelling, redness, and pain around a wound, it may be worth treating with an antibiotic. **Azithromycin 500 mg once a day for three days** will treat the bacterial skin infection.