Cruise Ship Medicine

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Medscape’s article Travel Medicine and Vaccination by Bret A Nick has pinpointed the medical risks when traveling by cruise ship. This popular kind of traveling often congregates large groups of people from different parts of the world. In such settings, diseases (influenza, measles, rubella, Norwalk virus, gastrointestinal illnesses) can spread from person-to-person contact. Additionally, if a ship comes to port and passengers disembark to sightsee, they may be at risk for other geographic specific diseases, although such risk is difficult to quantify. Also, certain diseases can be transmitted before symptoms are apparent and some people who become ill while on a cruise ship may have been infected prior to travel.

Historically, cruise ships were poorly staffed and equipped. Today, most cruise ships require a ship physician to have some emergency medicine experience. Many ships have minimal medications and few, if any, have laboratory or radiographic capabilities. However, some have mini-critical care units complete with monitors, ventilators, defibrillators/pacers, and appropriate medications. In general, the lack of resources can exhaust a physician's diagnostic and medical skills on a regular basis. One critical patient or an outbreak of Norwalk virus can overwhelm the ship’s hospital staff and use up all available resources while at sea.

Common medical conditions include the following:
- Sunburn
- Alcohol intoxication
- Seasickness
- Upper and lower respiratory infections
- Diarrhea and subsequent dehydration
- Minor orthopedic injuries
- Geographic specific illnesses
- Exacerbation of common medical illnesses
- Major orthopedic injuries, cardiac, diabetic crisis, and cerebrovascular accident (CVA) are not uncommon

People planning cruise ship travel, especially those older than 65 years, those with acute or chronic illnesses, or those who are pregnant or breastfeeding should consult with a health care provider prior to travel for advice and possible preventive medication. Other measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases on cruise ships include obtaining appropriate immunizations prior to leaving and frequent handwashing throughout the trip. Consider using portable antibacterial hand cleanser after touching handrails, elevator buttons, salt shakers, or any other surface that may have been touched by hundreds of people that day.