

Top Health Tips for Travel to Dominica

By Celia Sorhaindo & Paul Crask

Dominica's innately therapeutic landscape and natural resources make it an ideal destination for holistic health and wellness. The island's high percentage of centenarians is testament to this fact and although many of us will not make it to 100 here are some tips to help ensure a healthy and enjoyable stay.

Before you go

Dominica has no malaria and, unless you have just come from a place with yellow fever, there are no mandatory immunization requirements for people entering the country. Doctors usually recommend that standard vaccinations such as tetanus, diphtheria and polio jabs are up-to-date before traveling and you may also wish to consider protection against hepatitis A and typhoid. If you have any doubts, check with your doctor or health-care provider at least 4–6 weeks before your trip.

Visitors requiring medical care in Dominica are required to pay for treatment so it is strongly recommended that you have adequate medical insurance, especially coverage for emergency medical evacuation off the island.

During the flight

Long haul flights are said to increase the risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) in susceptible individuals such as those over 80 years of age, people who have had blood clots before, people with heart disease, heavy smokers, the obese, people with severe varicose veins or who have recently had major vein surgery. Immobility, dehydration and reduced oxygen in cabin air are thought to be primary contributory factors. To reduce the risk of DVT, exercise before and after the flight, move around regularly during the flight and perform simple muscular exercises. Also wear cool, loose fitting clothing and shoes that are not restrictive. Drink plenty of water and minimize alcohol, tea and coffee consumption as these can lead to dehydration. If your ears give you problems during take-off and landing then sucking sweets, chewing gum, yawning or swallowing may help.

Jet lag can also be a problem so it's important to be well rested before and during your flight. The key is to get your body used to the new time zone as soon as possible. Some people benefit from resetting their watch to the destination time as they board the plane but take advice from your doctor if you take regular medication. On arrival at your final destination avoid going for a nap if it's daytime. Try to stay active and to fit in with what the locals are doing when you arrive. So if it's breakfast time, eat breakfast. Stick to your normal eating patterns and try and sleep as close as possible to your normal bed time.

In-flight information and airline websites usually contain further suggested exercises and tips.

When you arrive

While in Dominica you will find numerous ways to enhance the health of your mind, body and spirit for all ages and abilities. Dominica is a natural "outdoor gym". Hiking, kayaking, river tubing, snorkeling, swimming, scuba diving, rappelling and horse riding are just some of the pursuits to keep you fit. Relaxation prescriptions include a visit to one of the many trained massage therapists and yoga teachers, whale and dolphin watching boat trip, a soak in a therapeutic warm sulphur spa or reading a good book on a deserted beach or by a pristine river.

The fertile soil, clean waters, industrious farmers and fishermen also ensure a constant supply of fresh, nutritious and tasty herbs, vegetables, fruits, ground provisions, fish and other seafood. The water is safe to drink but, if you prefer, bottled water is widely available throughout the island. There are also a delicious variety of freshly made juices and herbal or "bush" teas.

Sun Safety

Regardless of the imperative of returning home with a tan, it is important you take precautions especially with children. The sun here can burn sensitive skin in a very short period of time. Try to minimize direct sun exposure (it will find you without you having to lay stretched out on a beach for hours), look for shade, wear a hat, protect your skin with a sunscreen if you find it helps, and wear good quality sunglasses to protect your eyes. Act as if you don't want to go home with a tan and you are sure to return with a healthy glow rather than a painful burn and peeling skin.

Another key factor to consider in a tropical and often very humid climate is dehydration. It is very easy to become dehydrated without even realizing it and travelers far too frequently underestimate the volume of body liquids they are losing and need to replace. Always carry water with you and drink it often and in small amounts – even if you don't feel particularly thirsty. If you are sampling the delicious local rum punches at lunch time, follow with a large glass of water. That irritability, weariness, headache and dizziness you are experiencing as the day goes may be due to dehydration. The water in Dominica is great – try it and stay healthy.

Over exertion in the tropics can lead to heat exhaustion or even heatstroke. Heat exhaustion occurs when your body is throwing everything into trying to keep you cool. This will include profuse sweating, clammy skin, shallow breathing, nausea, headaches and stomach cramps. You must cool your body down straight away if you have any of these symptoms – jump into some cold water, find some shade, drink water and relax. Heatstroke occurs when you do nothing to counter heat exhaustion and body's cooling systems have given up. Your skin becomes hot and red, your breathing slows down and you become confused and dizzy. In severe cases, heatstroke can lead to death. If you suspect heatstroke, it is important to cool the body down and get medical assistance as soon as possible.

Prickly heat can occur if you sweat a lot. Dead skin cells and bacteria block sweat glands and your skin becomes inflamed, resulting in a very itchy rash. Air conditioning, cold showers, natural aloe vera and calamine lotion all help to relieve the itching. If you find

you are sweating a lot during your stay, and it is giving you prickly heat, then take a day or two off. Relax, don't do too much and give your skin a chance to cool down and recover. Some people have found exfoliating before travel helps.

Coping with Critters

There are no killer beasts in Dominica. No poisonous snakes, spiders, alligators, or anything else that may cause serious injury. There are however a number of critters that you may need to consider.

There is no risk of malaria in Dominica, but there are mosquitoes and although rare, there have been reported cases of dengue fever on the island. There is no vaccine to prevent dengue fever, which has severe flu-like symptoms so the best precaution is to avoid getting bitten. When indoors, window screens or nets over beds will help and for outdoors, wear lightweight long-sleeved shirts, long pants and apply a good insect repellent. If using a repellent containing DEET always follow the directions on the product, especially where children are concerned. It is also worth mentioning that a higher percentage of DEET does not necessarily mean it is more effective, it may just lasts longer between applications and excessive use of DEET over a long period of time is not recommended. There are a number of natural repellents, mainly aromatic plant essential oils, including citronella, catnip, lemon eucalyptus, garlic, lemongrass, rosemary, soybean and peppermint. Fans or creating a breeze can also work quite well in deterring mosquitoes. To avoid allergic reactions, do your research before deciding which repellent is best for you and your family. You should apply your repellent between dusk and dawn and remember sunscreen, getting wet from rain, swimming, perspiration etc may reduce repellent effectiveness and you may need to apply more frequently. Mosquitoes are attracted to dark colours, carbon dioxide, lactic acid released from eating certain foods, floral/fruity fragrances and moisture so avoid these or use them to lure mosquitoes away from you. A Mosquito bite itches and swells due to an allergic reaction to the mosquito's saliva. A mild soap and warm water wash, ammonia sticks, aloe vera gel, calamine lotion, tea tree, anti-inflammatory medication, antihistamine or a cold compress on the bite site may help to reduce the irritation and swelling. Avoid scratching the bite as it only prolongs the itch and you could end up with open wounds and infections which are bad news in the tropics.

Biting ants or chiggers (know locally as "bèt wouj") can catch you unaware if you are hiking in dense bush. Brushing against foliage or standing by a nest can give you an unpleasant surprise. Be careful where you put your hands and feet, and be sure to shake clothing before you put it back on again if you have rested it on the ground. Chigger bites itch like crazy so it is sensible to wear long pants and long sleeved shirts if going on any kind of adventure that may expose you to an enclosed forest environment. There are a number of over-the-counter chigger repellents including DEET repellents which work well and a wealth of suggested "home remedies" you can investigate to relieve the itching from chiggers. One of the best remedies is a hot shower and plenty of soap at the earliest opportunity, paying special attention to warm, moist areas (e.g. behind knees, the groin, anus, waist, armpits, neck, between toes etc). Again it is important to avoid scratching and also remember to wash your clothes with detergent on the hottest setting twice before wearing again.

All at Sea

If you are scuba diving in Dominica – which you should, as it is one of the best places in the world to do so – be sure to pay close attention to your dive profile and stay within recreational dive limits. Diving in Dominica is usually easy, but because the waters are very deep, it is always possible to exceed recommended depth or dive limits. Signs and symptoms of decompression sickness include tingling or numbness in the extremities, aching joints, headaches, nausea and skin rashes. If you feel you may have put yourself at risk, request 100% oxygen from your dive boat immediately and seek medical attention. Dominica has a recompression chamber located at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Roseau.

When enjoying Dominica's beautiful marine environment – whether swimming, snorkeling or scuba diving – it is always possible to encounter a creature with a sting. Don't worry, there are no sharks out there waiting for you – just an occasional sea urchin or a jellyfish. Sea urchins are bottom dwellers and have pointed spines that break off easily and puncture skin if you come into contact with them. If you find you have the tip of a sea urchin under your skin, you should seek medical attention to avoid infection. Brushing against small jellyfish usually results in a minor sting that goes away almost as quickly as it came. But if you do react or find you have been stung a few times, don't rub it – this makes it worse. Try dousing the affected area in white vinegar – it usually works well. Alternatively, seek medical attention to avoid infection from itching.

If you need medical treatment during your stay, there are several local health clinics, a private clinic and three public hospitals on the island; Marigot, Portsmouth, and the main hospital in Roseau, the Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH). Intensive care units are available at the Portsmouth Hospital and PMH. In case of an emergency, dial 999 for police, fire, or ambulance.

The number one tip is to relax, you are on the perfect island to de-stress. With Dominica's combination of great food, fresh spring water and pristine environment – you may well return home much healthier than when you came !

Note: This information is intended to give an overview of some health tips to consider and not a complete medical guide for travelers to Dominica. Always consult your doctor for specific information related to your needs and your medical history; recommendations may differ for pregnant women, young children, and persons who have chronic medical conditions.

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