

Pediatric clinic meets the unique needs of adopting parents and families who travel abroad



American families complete thousands of international adoptions each year. Many Americans travel to China, the Ukraine, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Ethiopia to adopt. Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA recently established an International Adoption and Travel Clinic, one of only three centers on the West Coast dedicated to the healthcare of families and children who travel internationally.

In addition to assisting families who are adopting, the clinic staff offers preventive care for children, adolescents and young adults who travel abroad.

Pre-travel adoption counseling

A major objective of the clinic is to prepare parents for adoption-related travel. During the pre-travel appointment, UCLA physicians review any materials the prospective parents have obtained about the child, including photographs and laboratory tests that may provide insights into the child's health status. The clinic staff furnish a travel kit containing supplies that may help parents meet the child's immediate needs, such as antibiotics and antipyretic medications. Moreover, clinic staff respond to telephone calls and e-mails from parents seeking advice on the child's health needs during the trip.

Meeting the needs of the littlest travelers

"The International Adoption and Travel Clinic was founded at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA in order to establish a standardized format for the care of children who travel internationally," says Nava Yeganeh, MD, clinical instructor, division of pediatric infectious diseases.

"We had been treating these patients, but we felt the field needed more directed attention and more effort," she says. "There's a lot of anxiety surrounding travel for adoption. We're able to use our experience to prepare parents and ease their emotional stress in order to make adoption the enjoyable process it should be for the entire family."

"International travel today is so commonplace, many families underestimate the health risks abroad," she says.

"There is so much you can do to prevent illness with just one pre-travel visit," Dr. Yeganeh says. "As pediatric infectious disease specialists, we often see people whose vacation is ruined because of illness or who return home ill. The clinic was established to put the focus on preventing these illnesses."

The pre-travel visit also targets the health of the parents and siblings who will be making the trip. Physicians review and discuss detailed information from the U.S. Department of State about specific health threats linked to a particular country or region. Clinic staff provide any necessary immunizations and advise families on strategies to avoid illness, such as recommendations on water and food consumption and the use of mosquito nets and insecticides.

International adoption post-travel healthcare

Within two weeks of their arrival in the United States, families are encouraged to return to the clinic with the adopted child for a comprehensive evaluation. The American Academy of Pediatrics currently recommends screening tests for all internationally adopted children without regard to age, sex or country of origin for infections including hepatitis A, B and C; HIV; parasites; syphilis; tuberculosis and varicella. Children are treated for active infections, including tuberculosis and other communicable diseases that may pose a threat to the community. Physicians also perform a preliminary developmental assessment. Children who require additional care are referred to physicians at UCLA's Pediatric Subspecialty Practice clinic, which is conveniently located in the same building.

Clinic physicians also have expertise in the adoption and care of HIV-positive children through the Care-4-Families program.

Travel clinic geared to children

A second aim of the clinic is to advise families who travel abroad with their children for any reason. In recent decades, more U.S. families are visiting exotic or remote locations, including Africa and Asia. The most common illnesses associated with international travel are easily preventable and include diarrhea, respiratory tract infections, malaria and skin diseases. Other common health problems include parasites, liver disease, fever and animal bites.

During the pre-travel visit, physicians discuss Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and World Health Organization recommendations for travel based on the destination. The pediatrician can administer routine and travel-based vaccinations, prescribe anti-malarial or other prophylactic medications and provide guidance about seeking medical assistance abroad for travel-related illness. The routine childhood immunization schedule can be condensed in the event of travel to ensure full protection against infectious diseases like measles. Families should seek the consultation at least two months prior to travel.

Clinic physicians also provide preventive care to young adults who are planning to travel, study abroad, serve in the Peace Corps or engage in internships or employment opportunities abroad.

The clinic staff welcomes the opportunity to work with primary care providers to answer questions and provide specialty services and consultations.

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