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Country Focus: South Africa

Visiting South Africa

Most people who visit South Africa have a safe and healthy trip, but awareness of hazards helps reduce your chance of illness or injury. Potential health hazards include contaminated food and water, insect spread diseases, rabies, respiratory infections, road traffic accidents, sexually spread infections and sun damage.

Be alert about road safety and remember driving regulations may be different. Make sure you are familiar with South Africa's road rules for drivers, passengers and pedestrians.

Advice for travellers

Before you travel

See our [South Africa Country Information page](#) for current health advice.

Check the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO): [South Africa country advice](#) for up to date safety and security information and guidance about driving/transport risks. You can also sign up for [FCDO email updates](#) about South Africa.

See our [general advice for travellers](#) to help you plan your trip.

[Mosquito spread illnesses](#) like [chikungunya](#), [malaria](#) and [West Nile virus](#) are a risk in South Africa and antimalarials may be recommended for certain areas. See our [South Africa malaria map and advice](#) for more information.

While dengue fever and Zika virus have not been reported in South Africa [1, 2] the mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*) that can carry both infections, is found in some parts of this country [1].

See your GP, practice nurse, pharmacist or travel clinic for travel vaccine recommendations and malaria advice. You should also check that all your routine United Kingdom (UK) vaccines, including [polio, diphtheria and tetanus](#) and [measles, mumps and rubella \(MMR\)](#) are in date.

Consider having a [flu vaccine](#) before you travel. This is particularly important if you have any underlying health problems.

If you have any medical issues, get advice from your GP or hospital specialist before you go to help you manage your condition during your trip.

If you take any regular medicines, see our advice about [travelling with medication](#). For certain medicines, such as [controlled drugs](#), you may need to apply for a special permit. If you are unsure about your medicine, contact the [South African High Commission](#) directly for advice.

Carry a basic [first aid kit](#) and get comprehensive [travel health insurance](#) that covers all your planned activities and any health conditions you have. Check [FCDO insurance advice](#) and remember to pack your insurance documents.

If you are [pregnant](#) or planning a pregnancy, discuss the suitability of your trip with your midwife and a travel health professional. This is particularly important if you are thinking of travelling to an area of South Africa with a risk of [malaria](#), as this infection is more dangerous in pregnancy.

[Rabies](#) is a potentially fatal virus that spreads to humans from animals via bites, scratches and spitting, and is a risk in South Africa [3, 4]. While dogs are the most common animal that spreads rabies to humans [3], other animals can carry rabies (including pets) and rabies virus has recently been found in seals in the Western Cape in South Africa [5, 6].

Although it is rare, rabies has been reported in travellers [7]. In 2009, a fatal rabies case was reported in a UK resident who had worked in an animal sanctuary in South Africa [8].

Get advice about the rabies vaccine course before you travel, ideally well in advance of your trip.

Since May 2024, a number of cases of rabies have been confirmed in Cape fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*) from locations along the coastline between Plettenberg Bay and Melkbosstrand. Rabies has been very infrequently reported in seals globally. Investigations are underway to understand the extent of the occurrence of rabies in these animals [9].

Avoid contact with seals, and rabies vaccination should be considered if you are planning sea sports or activities like diving, snorkelling and surfing in affected areas. If you are bitten by a seal, clean the wound thoroughly and seek medical attention straight away, as post exposure prophylaxis may be recommended.

If you have had a course of rabies vaccine, remember to take your vaccine records with you.

While you are away

During your journey

Any long journey, including a long haul flight, can increase your risk of venous thromboembolism (VTE)/[deep vein thrombosis \(DVT\)](#):

- Walk around as much as possible.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Avoid putting hand luggage under the seat in front of you, as this restricts movement.
- Regularly flex and extend your ankles to encourage blood flow.
- Avoid tight clothes around your waist or legs.
- Make sure you know the signs and symptoms of DVT/VTE and get emergency medical help if you have any [symptoms](#).

In South Africa

Be aware of your [personal safety](#) at all times.

Check local and national government advice and FCDO country information regularly for updates.

Reduce your risk of insect spread infections, including malaria, by following [insect and tick bite avoidance](#) advice including wearing long sleeves/trousers and applying insect repellent regularly.

Reduce your risk of [respiratory infections](#), including [COVID-19](#), by following basic good hygiene rules:

- Cover your nose and mouth when you cough and sneeze.

- Wash your hands [10].

[Temperature and humidity](#) can be very high in South Africa. Remember to drink plenty of fluids and [protect yourself from the sun](#) by covering up with appropriate clothes and wearing sunglasses. Regularly apply high-factor sunscreen.

Take care with eating and drinking and follow [basic good food hygiene](#) rules.

[Mpox](#) - South Africa has reported a recent increase in Mpox (formerly known as Monkeypox) cases [11].

Mpox is an infectious virus spread by close contact with animals, people or with contaminated material like bedding, clothes or towels; the virus enters the body through broken skin or via the eyes, nose, or mouth. Risk of Mpox is very low for most travellers. If you are a health workers or a gay, bisexual or other man who has sex with men, you may be at increased risk and can find [information about how to protect yourself against Mpox here](#).

Unprotected sex puts you at risk of [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) including [HIV](#). Carry your own condoms and [practice safer sex](#).

Rabies

Avoid contact with all animals and remember that even pets, can carry rabies.

Following a bite, scratch or any potential exposure, wash the wound site, follow immediate [first aid advice](#) and get urgent medical help. This is very important, even if the wound/exposure appears trivial and even if you had a course of pre-travel rabies vaccine.

Bats also carry rabies - if you find a bat in your bedroom, you must also get urgent medical advice.

Since May 2024, a number of cases of rabies have been confirmed in Cape fur seals from locations along the coastline between Plettenberg Bay and Melkbosstrand.

Avoid contact with seals but if you are bitten by a seal, clean the wound thoroughly and seek medical attention straight away, post exposure prophylaxis may be recommended.

When you return

If you were prescribed antimalarial tablets; remember to finish the course when you get home, even if you feel fine. If you are ill within weeks or even months of your trip, particularly if you have fever or flu-like symptoms and/or diarrhoea, you must get urgent (same day) medical help. Remember to tell your doctor you visited South Africa, a malaria risk country.

Rabies

If you had any kind of possible animal rabies exposure in South Africa, you must get prompt medical advice when you get back to the UK. Even if you had treatment in South Africa, you may need further rabies vaccine doses. Remember to bring any vaccine or treatment records to your appointment. If treatment was not started when you were away, your GP can get expert advice to see if you need to start rabies post-exposure treatment in the UK.

If you had unprotected sex during your trip or think you might have an STI, go to a free, confidential [sexual health clinic](#) for advice.

Resources

- [Cancer Research: Sun safety](#)
- [GOV.UK: Driving abroad](#)
- [Medicines and travel](#)
- [Rabies risk worldwide: practical advice during rabies vaccine shortages](#)
- [UK Health Security Agency: Beat the heat: staying safe in hot weather](#)
- [UK Health Security Agency: Rabies: risks for travellers](#)

References

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