

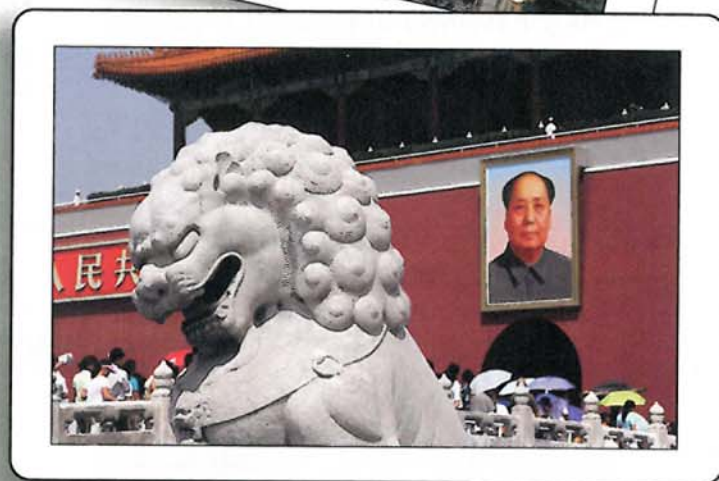
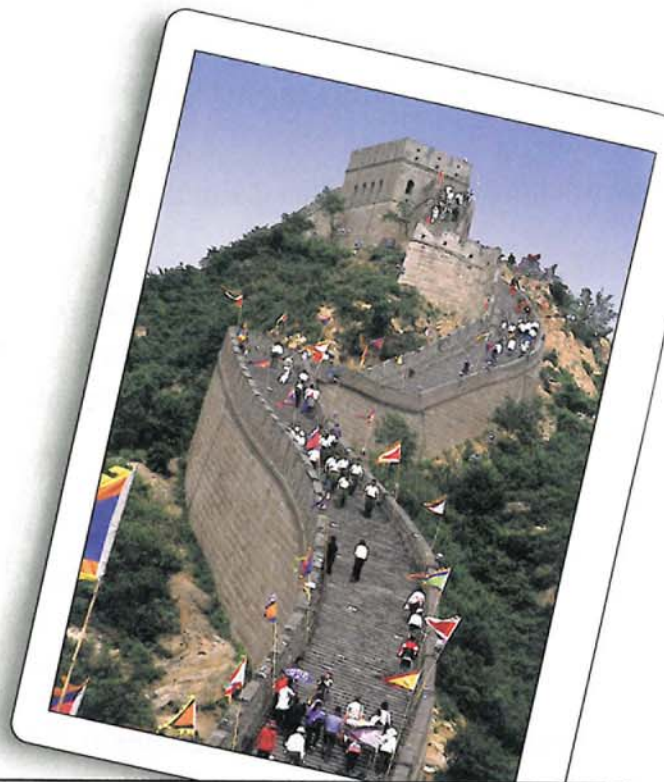


Product Spotlight

AT THE BEIJING OLYMPICS, HEALTH CARE IS NOT A GAME

Half a world from home, travelers to the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing will wonder if good medical care is available. In fact, any visitor to China may seek competent care for a chronic health condition, accident, contraction of an infectious disease, or reaction to local air, food and water. With the prevalence of herbal medicine in China, wary westerners could easily encounter treatment that is not recognizable as “modern” medicine.

Planners in Beijing conservatively estimate that the Olympics will attract at least 500,000 visitors from outside China for the 17-day event in August. According to research published in the *Journal of Travel Medicine*, eight percent of travelers to developing countries can be expected to seek medical care while abroad. Even this small fraction (which amounts to more than 2,300 Olympics visitors per day) would overwhelm the capacity of clinics, hospitals and doctors practicing western-style medicine in Beijing.



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by Frank Gillingham, M.D.
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These daunting figures place a priority on careful preparation and the selection of high-quality travel health insurance and assistance services. Travelers should consider the following when visiting a developing country:

- What happens in an emergency?
- Where are the best doctors?
- Which hospitals provide the best care?
- How do I find a pharmacy, and are the medications reliable?
- What should I expect to pay for medical services and drugs?

The cost and quality of medical care in China, along with the availability and reliability of prescription medications, are unpredictable, and steps should be taken to avoid surprises. Travelers should obtain clearance to

Getting the Care You Need Could Be a Challenge

Emergency response to a medical crisis in China—even in major cities—is not up to western standards. Ambulances in China are not well-equipped and, although there is usually a nurse and a doctor onboard, they are not always prepared for real emergencies. They are not well-trained in basic life support and do not carry a lot of medication.

Public ground ambulances in Beijing generally respond quickly, but their responsiveness depends on the location of the medical emergency. Gridlock is rampant in Beijing, so traffic is a real struggle for ground ambulances. In rural areas, emergency medical services do not even exist. Although China is working hard to prepare for the Olympics, with hospital experts from France and the United States providing advice, it is unlikely that the emergency response system will improve significantly before the summer.

In contrast, some private clinics operate their own ambulance service, and there are several well-trained, English-speaking physicians to greet westerners upon arrival.

There is no free medical care in China. Unless covered by a travel insurance company that has contracted with physicians and hospitals in China, a traveler should expect to pay cash for medical services, whether at a private or public facility. Moreover, the care provided at public facilities, although generally inexpensive, is usually not up to western standards.

Pharmacies in China are licensed to carry western prescription and over-the-counter drugs, traditional Chinese medicines, health foods and family planning products. The pharmacies are government-controlled and have strict price controls in place. If a traveler needs to refill or replace a prescription, there is a moderate chance it will be unavailable at any price.

