

Staying home and hiding under the bed is one way to avoid getting colds, flu, upset stomach and all the other bothersome wintertime ailments.

But, hey, what roamin' senior wants to miss all the seasonal air and hotel bargains, and when cruises and resort cities are not crowded with young families and teens on school break? Here are a few suggestions on how to avoid letting all those winter bugs from catching up to you while you're in the air, at sea and on the road.



1. Which have the dirtiest toilets: service stations, Iranian prisons or airplanes? The answer: all three and many more. Always carry medicated wipes or small bottles of hand-cleaning fluid when using public toilets. If paper seat covers are provided, use them. If not, wash yourself thoroughly before you leave the room. Don't use the door handle. If the door pushes outward, use your back. If you must touch the handle, wrap a paper towel around your freshly-washed hand.

2. Avoid sardine-can seating situations. If possible, bump up to first class on flights, where you're not squeezed in, and the air is fresher. In airport, bus and train waiting areas, try to find isolated space for yourself to get away from the inevitable coughers and sneezers. If buses and elevators are very crowded, wait for the next one.

3. After walking or riding through public places where you must touch or hold on to things, such as on elevators, bus straps, escalators and stairways with railings, use your medicated hand wipes. Don't pick up food or liquid containers left behind by others.

4. Never eat uncooked food nor drink homemade liquids from vendors on busy streets. Make sure any packaged, bottled or canned items you buy are unopened with their original seals. Before you go to a country that isn't known for high standards of cleanliness, check your own government's health information sources for info and warnings.

5. Just in case you do eat or drink anything that could give you trouble, or are exposed to sick people, be sure you travel with adequate supplies of all proper medications, both prescription and over-the-counter. If flying or cruising could upset your stomach, be sure you take along

antidotes for those problems.

6. After all your precautions, you may decide to put ice cubes in your drink. What can be bad about that? Plenty. Ice cubes made from local water in some areas of the world have just as much pollution and potential danger as the water itself. Be sure your ice cubes are from adequately purified or sealed bottle water containers.

7. If you request hot coffee or tea from a flight attendant, make sure it was thoroughly boiled within the past few minutes. Many airlines use city water for serving passengers onboard, and the aircraft tanks could have been filled days or weeks ago. Ask for bottled water or buy a bottle in the airport (after going through security) and take it aboard.

8. This sounds almost too icky to be true, but it happens more frequently than you may think. When you check into a hotel, before you do anything else in your room, immediately pull down the covers and examine the sheets. If you see tiny black spots, they're bedbugs. One morning last year, when we woke up in our upscale room in a posh Las Vegas resort, we had little red marks on our bodies where the bugs had fed. We demanded a refund, checked out and went for medical help to prevent infection. Don't accept another room in the same hotel. Those little bugs get around quickly.

9. Maybe back in the days of your flaming youth, you could eat raw or near-raw foods without any problems. However, as a senior, your stomach may be less accepting of such rugged fare. You can eat fresh veggies and fruit, as long as they've been thoroughly washed. However, make sure all your meats, poultry and seafood are fresh, well cooked and served steaming hot. If they're in a cold salad, lots of luck.

10. This is a personal recommendation for a travel magic cure-all, and I'm sure your doctor and pharmacist will disagree. I'm a total non-drinker, but when I travel I carry a small bottle or flask of brandy. If I'm flying and security says no, I buy brandy locally at my destination.

A half-jigger of brandy works in wondrous ways. If I have trouble sleeping after a hectic flight and internal clock confusion, a bit of brandy puts me in dreamland in moments. If I feel a cold coming on, the liquor has a soothing effect on my throat. If I do catch a cold, a few brandy sips a day brings the best relief. After all, with a dozen wives and girlfriends, meanwhile conquering half the world and schussing home from snowy Moscow, Napoleon must have found brandy very helpful.