

# At the Beijing Summer Olympics, healthcare is not a game.

HTH Worldwide

## Medical Care in China: What to Expect

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Half a world from home and with chronic health conditions, a traveler to the Summer Olympic games in Beijing will wonder if good medical care is available. In fact, any visitor may seek competent care in case of an accident, contraction of an infectious disease or reaction to local air, food and water. With the prevalence of traditional, herbal medicine in China, the wary Westerner could easily encounter treatment that is not recognizable as "modern" medicine.

Travelers should consider the following questions 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 their medications reliable? What should I expect to pay for medical services and drugs?

Emergency response to a medical crisis in major cities is not up to western standards. Ambulances in China are not well equipped. 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 of 2008.

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 like HTH Worldwide which 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.

**A note of caution:** 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. The prudent traveler should get clearance to travel from his or her own physician, have an ample supply of prescription medicines, avoid behaviors that could cause injury or exacerbate an illness, and obtain a travel insurance policy from a company like [HTH Worldwide](#), who strives to create access to carefully selected providers and medical care around the world.

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### About the author

As Medical Director, Frank has led HTH Worldwide's international business development efforts in Europe and Canada and is often a guest speaker at international business conferences. Frank is a Board-Certified Internist and Emergency Medicine Specialist. He is also a private emergency physician in Southern California and a former emergency department director and member of the UCLA emergency department staff. He currently is the assistant director at the Valley Presbyterian Hospital in Los Angeles. Frank completed residency training at Los Angeles County/USC Medical Center, received his M.D. from Albert Einstein College of Medicine and his B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. He has authored several articles on travel medicine, including pieces on travel information available on the internet and the role of physicians working with travel insurers. He and his wife have traveled extensively with their four children in pursuit of the perfect Scuba diving experience.

### About HTH Worldwide

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