

Travelling is a risky business when health is overlooked

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Australians heading overseas are ignoring potential health risks out of a desire to escape reality through travel, according to University of Queensland-led research.

Dr. Jie Wang from UQ Business School led the study in partnership with colleagues and Dr. Deborah Mills from Travel Medicine Alliance.

The study found many travellers chose not to undertake protective behaviours such as consulting [health professionals](#), buying travel insurance or receiving appropriate vaccines, partly because of maladaptive perceptions.

"Maladaptive perceptions can indirectly influence people to behave in ways that increase risk or danger," Dr. Wang said.

"They can negatively affect your personal [health](#) behaviour."

The research team surveyed almost 300 Australians who had travelled to Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam in the preceding three years

to gain a broad understanding of health risk perceptions.

Avoidance and holiday spirit were identified as the most common types of travellers' maladaptive perceptions.

"Avoidance is about people wanting to push away [negative feelings](#) and not think about risks," Dr. Wang said.

"Almost half of our research participants believed they could simply avoid contact with wild animals in South-East Asia, eliminating their need to worry about diseases like rabies.

"They didn't bother with a rabies vaccine because they didn't feel it was needed."

However, travel medicine specialist Dr. Mills said it was not always possible to avoid these risks.

"Many Australians are unaware of the risk of contracting rabies overseas because we don't have animals with this disease here," Dr. Mills said.

"But most people affected by rabies aren't going out of their way to pat or touch [wild animals](#).

"Take the Balinese monkeys that jump on people's shoulders, or the dogs that bite travellers as they're walking into a shop."

The study also found that holiday spirit—the tendency to focus on pleasure-seeking and fun—influenced more than one-third of participants to ignore [health risks](#).

With around ten million Australians travelling overseas every year, Dr. Wang said it was more important than ever to correct such perceptions.

"Our research could help tourism practitioners, public health bodies and [government agencies](#)

educate the public," she said.

"Highlighting why travellers should do something as simple as having a pre-travel health consultation four to six weeks before departure or taking out travel insurance could help reduce the negative health outcomes of international travel."

A second phase of the study is underway, focusing on how to design specific and persuasive health risk messages for travellers.

The study has been published in *Annals of Tourism Research*.

More information: Jie Wang et al. Travellers' self-protections against health risks: An application of the full Protection Motivation Theory, *Annals of Tourism Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.annals.2019.102743](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102743)

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