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When are you too sick to vacation?

By Johanna Crosby
STAFF WRITER
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You never plan on getting sick or hurt when you're on vacation.

But it happens: You fry your skin at the beach, step into a patch of poison ivy, take a spill on a bike.

Ouch!

But should you pack up your bags and head home, or stay on vacation and make the best of it?

That depends a lot on you, say local medical professionals.

"Our job is to help people sort out whether it's better to go home," said Dr. Timothy Reed of the Orleans Medical Center.

"Someone with a 104-degree fever doesn't want to pack up for a six-hour drive home," Reed said. "But if you fracture your ankle on your first day of vacation, you may be better off getting care at home, because you will require follow-up and monitoring."

Over the course of the summer, medical professionals at Cape emergency rooms and walk-in clinics see vacationers with a myriad of illnesses and injuries - you name it - including: insect bites, jellyfish stings, rashes, poison ivy, food

poisoning, allergic reactions to shellfish, sunburn, swimmer's ear, lacerations or abrasions, appendicitis, ear infections and conjunctivitis.

Many common, summer-related ailments are quite treatable, said Reed, who said he rarely prescribes going home.

Deciding whether to stay depends on different factors, clinicians say, including the severity of the illness or injury; age; how far away home is; how long you plan to be on vacation; and whether you're a solo traveler without any support.

For some folks, it's a matter of comfort level, said Dr. Herbert Gray, chief of the Falmouth Hospital emergency department.

"Some people get very excited about the same problem" that others accept with equanimity, said Gray, who's seen parents go home because their child has an ear ache and other people remain on the Cape after a heart attack.

In many cases, there's no medical reason to go home "because we have all the care (they need) here," Gray said. Yet some people prefer to go home to see their own doctor.

What worries Dr. Stuart Fischer, a former emergency-care attending physician and author of "The Little Book of Big Medical Emergencies" (Hatherleigh Press, 2007, \$12.95), is that most people will deny they have something medically wrong, especially when they're on vacation.

"Going home won't solve the problem," said Fischer, who, in a recent telephone interview, strongly advised seeking medical attention first. "If you are dealing with a health issue like a high fever or chest pains, a five-hour drive home can be a disastrous mistake."

Fischer warned that some medical problems, such as fractures and severe allergic reactions to shellfish or bee stings, may be potentially life-threatening if not treated right away. But many typical summer-related ailments can be successfully treated in a local ER, he said, and often a person will get better within 24 hours.

The majority of vacationers treated at Fontaine Medical Center in Harwich have minor injuries or conditions that can be resolved in a few days, said operations manager Beverly Williams.

Someone with a chronic problem that flares up while on vacation may be better off going home to see their primary care physician, Williams said. But a person

who suffers something like an acute appendicitis attack cannot take the risk of going home to be treated, she said.