

# Don't Drink the Water: How to Avoid Risk-Taking Side Effects

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Imagine crystal clear waves washing up on white sand beaches, lively steel pan music floating through humid air, and sweet rum punch flowing freely into your glass. Several years ago I enjoyed all three delights during a heavenly vacation in serene Trinidad and Tobago, a Caribbean country comprised of two islands located off the northeastern coast of Venezuela. Highlights of my trip include snorkeling with sea turtles and dolphins, exploring a lush rainforest on a jeep safari, and partaking in the ultimate revelry that is Carnival: dancing in a feathered costume among strangers from across the globe. Best of all, I experienced Trinidad and Tobago's culture through my favorite conduit: food.

Before traveling abroad, my caring and risk-averse mom warned, "Don't drink the tap water or you will get sick." So for the first two days of my vacation, I purchased bottled water and only ate meals at well-established restaurants. But I soon realized that limiting myself to tourist-intended eateries was preventing me from experiencing the true local culture. And I convinced myself that no foreign stomach bug could breach my iron gut. Thereafter, I drank only tap water and ate only street food. Once, I even purchased breakfast out of the trunk of a stranger's sedan! Every street meal was incredibly tasty and, no, Mom, I didn't get sick.

My experience with foreign street food is probably not typical. Luck and thorough planning both helped me avoid the unwanted side effects associated with food-related risks. Instead of lying in bed suffering from severe nausea, I enjoyed surprisingly positive side effects including thrills from exotic spices and a pleasantly full tummy. I wonder if my recent experience can help or inspire you to fortify your nonprofit against the negative side effects of risk-taking. Have a taste of my favorite Trinidad and Tobago dishes, and take a look at my packing list for risk-takers.

## Favorite Trinidad & Tobago Dishes

*Meal:* Roti (ROH-tee)

*Cost in USD:* \$4

*Location Purchased:* Wooden shack on the side of the road

*Description:* Thin, crepe-like wrap filled with fried fish, spicy curried potatoes, chickpeas, and grilled mango.

*Side Effects:* Pleasurable "Mmmm!" sounds, rousing burning sensation on tongue, full tummy, and food-induced sleepiness.

*Meal:* Barbecue Chicken

*Cost in USD:* \$8

*Location Purchased:* Tent on the side of the road

*Description:* Half of a tender, barbecued chicken served with banana salad, cassava pie, and curried lentils.

*Side Effects:* Silence caused by continually full mouth, comfort and contentment, extreme fullness and lethargy.

*Meal:* Doubles

*Cost in USD:* 75¢

*Location Purchased:* Trunk of a sedan parked in the lot of a deserted building

*Description:* Sweet, egg-based fried bread with curried chickpeas and cucumber.

*Side Effects:* Pleasant surprise, smiles and sticky fingers, longing for similarly cheap yet delicious street food in the US.

I embraced food-related risks during my vacation. But, I'm the type of person that invites risk when it holds opportunities for personal growth. If you are a leader who recognizes that risk-taking is essential for organizational growth, consider packing the following essential items into your carry-on. Whether you're risking food poisoning or negative feedback from funders, this packing list will help you combat the negative side effects in order to capitalize on upside risks.

### **Risk-Taker's Packing List**

**Aspirin®:** A pain reliever can help maintain your nonprofit's operations while you travel through a bevy of risks. Many nonprofit pain relievers come in the form of a Risk Champion, Safety Task Force, Crisis Response Team or Risk Management Committee. These leaders provide both preventive and responsive health support to your nonprofit. In advance of a risk or crisis materializing, the team devises a plan. And like a reliable, OTC pain-reliever, your risk team is ready to relieve the side effects of downside risks you were unable to avoid. Effective risk teams often display the following characteristics:

1. The commitment to involve colleagues with diverse points of view in risk assessment and risk management
2. The courage to take risks
3. The guts to reflect honestly on the efficacy of the risk management program
4. The patience to tackle specific risk management goals, such as freeing up financial resources or engaging the board in risk oversight

**Bandages:** If you do get a scrape from risk-taking, you might need bandages or a compress—or even a crisis management plan—to stop the bleeding. Never travel far from your zone of comfort and experience without a clear, easy-to-implement emergency plan. Remember that your crisis management plan is likely to be a bit different from your more comprehensive, proactive risk management plan. Your crisis management plan should include policies on communicating with stakeholders and the media during a crisis. You don't want to wind up in foreign territory without being able to speak the language.

**Pepcid®:** When your efforts to avoid the negative effects of risk-taking don't pan out, you might need a heartburn reliever. An honest self-assessment of "what happened" is probably in order. Everyone gets a little heartburn after experiencing a setback, but the most successful risk-takers relish the opportunity to revamp and improve their efforts. Take a dose of Pepcid® and begin the critique!

**Sunscreen:** Before heading out to the beach, always apply liberal amounts of sunscreen to reduce the risk of damage from exposure to the sun. A nonprofit's sunscreen is the strategic vision of its board. Your board members are responsible for assessing the big picture risks that could threaten mission sustainability. Never leave the board's vision off your packing list. In fact, insist that the board focus on distant threats and opportunities—guidance at a high SPF—to keep your nonprofit from getting burned. Stop burying the board in operational details and free up board agendas to allow sufficient time for the discussion of strategic issues. Then sit back and watch your board shine.

**Vaccinations:** Your risk management plan is like a vaccine. The plan helps you monitor the big risks that could threaten the health of your nonprofit, and offers strategies and activities which act as a booster to fend off germs. With your risk management plan in place, you can travel the world with confidence. Your risk management plan should include reference to your commitment to strengthen the risk assessment and risk management skills of your staff. If your organization needs or aspires to create a custom-fit risk management plan, create one using the Center's popular Cloud tool, [My Risk Management Plan](#). If your nonprofit has a risk management plan with noticeable gaps, consider creating custom policies that suit your culture with our program [My Risk Management Policies](#).

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