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What to Do If You Get Sick in Sochi

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One of central Sochi's 24-hour pharmacies, located on Ulitsa Vorobskogo. **Yekaterina Kravtsova**

SOCHI — More than 1,000 doctors from Russia's regions have been sent to Sochi for the Olympic period, with more than 250 million rubles allocated for providing health care to athletes and tourists, but visitors who do not speak Russian could run into problems if they have to deal with the medical system.

Several national Olympic committees have expressed concerns over health support for their athletes and visitors, and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow published a fact sheet that paints a grim picture of local health care.

But Russian authorities said that the best doctors from other Russian regions had been sent to Sochi and that all of them had received additional training and took English courses, while all the Sochi 2014 staff have been preventively vaccinated.

"I would like to emphasize that the Sochi organizing committee and the city's administration have achieved outstanding results in what concerns health service for people coming to the

Winter Olympics," said Gerald Rockenschaub, head of the World Health Organization's European office, in October, adding that he had "no doubts" about the competence of doctors at Sochi hospitals.

According to Deputy Health Minister Igor Kagramanyan, hundreds of doctors have been sent to Sochi for the Olympic period, including about 800 doctors from Krasnodar region hospitals, 600 from the Tatarstan republic who worked at the World Student Games in Kazan last summer, and 600 from Moscow clinics.

Six hospitals in the city of Sochi are authorized to accept foreign citizens during the Olympics: hospitals No. 1, 4, 6, 9, an infectious disease hospital and a children's hospital. There is also hospital No. 8 in Krasnaya Polyana near the mountain cluster of Olympic venues, which was specially upgraded ahead of the Games. There are no foreign-run inpatient clinics in Sochi.

Near Olympic facilities, 39 medical stations have been opened, with some 50 ambulances working at both the Olympic facilities and in the city of Sochi. Olympic organizers appear to be counting on these medical stations to handle the bulk of visitors' health care issues — on the English-language version of the official Sochi 2014 website, only Hospital No. 1 is included on a general list of "Places" in Sochi, in addition to 13 pharmacies.

An information sheet published by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow describes the Sochi medical system in rather negative terms, saying that Western medical care in Sochi "can be expensive, difficult to obtain, and not always comprehensive."

"Some facilities offer quality services, but many restrict services to normal business hours and/or to members or people willing to pay for services in advance," the information sheet says. "State medical care is officially free of charge, but the quality of service ranges from unacceptable to merely uncomfortable. However, Russian doctors often demand payment for disposable needles, medications, and some services."

Deputy Sochi Mayor Irina Romanets announced last year that all city medical facilities would work 24 hours a day during the Games, but Oksana Murogyan, a receptionist at Sochi's City Clinic No. 2, which has four departments in the city, said nothing had been changed in the clinic's schedule, except the usual time for ambulances to be available, which was extended for two hours in the evening.

"Basically, that is the only difference in our work for the Olympic period," she said by phone. "Ambulances used to work until 8 p.m., and now they will work until 10 p.m." The clinic has only an outpatient department.

She said the clinic was ready to accept foreign patients even if they had no insurance and that it had received several new doctors for the Olympic period, including an infectious disease specialist, endocrinologist, neurologist and urologist.

But she admitted that she was not aware if the doctors had been additionally trained before the Olympics or whether they could speak English.

Krasnodar regional authorities promised to provide emergency aid for everyone for free but said there could be some fees if a person needed to get treatment at a hospital, noting that

insurance was required.

Representatives at Sochi hospitals contacted by The Moscow Times said they were not authorized to speak to the media. A representative at Hospital No. 8 in Krasnaya Polyana said the hospital had signed a nondisclosure agreement.

A receptionist at Sochi's Hospital No. 2 said that it would not provide medical support for Olympic visitors and athletes and that some of the hospital's doctors had been sent to Hospital No. 4, a newly built facility that will accept foreigners for treatment. A representative at Hospital No. 4 declined to comment.

According to Sochi Health Department head Alexander Lebedev, additional donated blood and medicines have been delivered to Sochi, for which some 1.3 million rubles ($37,000) were allocated.

Anzhela Dorokhova, a pharmacist at a drugstore on Ulitsa Ostrovskogo in central Sochi, said there have been no additional deliveries, however, and no instructions were given on how the pharmacy must operate during the Olympic period.

"No foreign citizens have come to our pharmacy so far, but I am sure tourists will be asking for medicines that have the same pronunciation in all languages and we will understand them," she said, adding that she could speak English with the help of a dictionary.

Most of the pharmacies seen by a Moscow Times reporter operate 24 hours a day, but for English-speaking visitors it could be problematic to buy medicine in Sochi. None of the specially built English-language signs in the city have directions to hospitals or pharmacies, and it can take up to an hour to find the nearest pharmacy in the city center. Moreover, most of the pharmacists do not speak English.

When asking for a headache remedy at a pharmacy on Ulitsa Vorovskogo, a pharmacist said in Russian that she did not speak any English and called a friend who she thought spoke the language. People standing in line at the pharmacy did not speak any English either. It took about 15 minutes for the pharmacist to understand what was being asked for.

"Wait a moment, please," she said, repeating what her friend on the phone had said, adding in Russian that she did not know what that meant.

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