



Travelling Overseas safely with **Diabetes**



General

At times it may feel that because you have a condition like diabetes that it is not worth the trouble or the risk of undertaking a foreign journey. Many opportunities to travel are lost because you may feel that it is just too much trouble. Nonsense! All it takes is a bit of common sense and following a few basic rules.

Types of Diabetes

Some patients require a change in their diet and regular medications or injections of insulin to maintain their body sugar levels while others can control this sufficiently with just dietary control. No matter which of these groups you fit into it is essential that you know your limits as to what you can and should eat and how exercise or even stress may affect your blood sugar levels.

Notify others about your diet

Tell your airline and the hotel where you will be staying about the specific requirements of your diabetic diet. This will help them prepare the correct food for you well in advance and make life easier for everyone. If you are travelling as part of a group make sure some responsible person knows of your condition so they could recognise the early signs of low blood sugar levels which can come on very suddenly even in the most experienced diabetic patient while travelling.

Make sure your diabetes is stable

If you have been recently diagnosed as a diabetic check with your physician before you book your trip overseas. They may suggest that you wait until your condition is well controlled and you are able to easily recognise the early signs of either high or low sugar levels for your own safety.

Carry all your requirements

Make sure that you have sufficient medications (Insulin, oral hypoglycaemics) as well as syringes, needles, alcohol pads and glucose monitoring devices which you will need for the length of time you are abroad. It is essential to carry your own medication since preparations may vary significantly from country to country. Carry the supplies with you - **NOT** in your suitcase which may easily become misplaced. If you need to carry syringes make sure you have a way of proving that these are essential for your personal health.

Travelling across time zones

When you are travelling across time zones it is very easy to continue your medication but you may miss out on your regular meals. You should know the number of time zones you will be travelling across. Travelling North to South will usually require no specific changes to your normal regime. If you are travelling East to West or from West to East across more than six time zones then you will need to make some adjustments. A good tip is to have one watch set at 'home' time for at least the first 24 hours. This will help you to correctly adjust your insulin dosage. [Don't miss your connections!]

Obtain a letter from your physician

Depending on your itinerary, before you leave make sure that you have a letter from your physician, on their headed note paper, outlining your requirements for insulin and accompanying equipment. Keep all medications in their original containers. Don't let your supplies look in any way suspicious! Syringes and customs don't work well together usually!

Refrigerate your supplies

If you need insulin make sure you store it in a good quality cooled thermos for travelling and, as soon as you reach your hotel, place the insulin in the lower part of the fridge. Often it is best to leave it in the opened thermos. **Mark it as essential medication.** Don't freeze the insulin. Also remember that insulin will deteriorate if it is exposed to temperatures of 100°F or higher so don't place it in the boot of your car or the glove compartment while in a hot climate.

Watch your diet

Sometimes while abroad it can be very difficult to identify the calorie/sugar content of foods you have not tried before. Especially over the first few days while travelling watch carefully what you eat and drink and if you are unsure of the glucose content within your diet then monitor your blood levels more frequently and adjust your medication / intake to compensate.

Exercise and Travel

Often trips overseas can be quite exercise orientated. This may be simply associated with lugging your suitcase around but also with trekking holidays. Your blood sugar levels may drop rapidly in association with exercise so take care.

Infection while overseas

In general people with diabetes will notice that any break in their skin is more likely to become infected. Because of this it is very important to carry some antiseptic ointment and to treat any cut or scrape as early as possible.

Care for your feet

Walking and trekking holidays can put unusual strain on your feet and in diabetic patients it is really important that you have well fitted and comfortable boots for any trip which will require you to walk significant distances. Attending a chiropodist before a walking holiday and getting their advice is sensible. Treat any blisters or sores as early as possible to lessen the risk of infection.

Mosquitoes just love me!

Actually mosquitoes and sandflies love everyone. It is just that people with diabetes may react more to their bites and any scratching can easily lead to infection very easily. We would always recommend that you carry an antiseptic/steroid cream to treat bites as early as possible to lessen this risk.

Medi-Alert Wrist band and first-aid kit

Travellers with diabetes may become hypoglycaemic very rapidly and may even be unable to help themselves by taking glucose. Wearing a good Medi-Alert bracelet and carrying a laminated information card with your details will help others to identify the problem quickly and ensure that correct treatment is started. Include a history of any known allergies on the information bracelet and identify your specific treatment. A small well stocked first-aid kit is also essential.

Get contact details

Where possible, make sure that you have a list of the English speaking doctors in the countries you are planning to visit or else the telephone numbers for one of the major embassy offices. Also, have contact numbers for your medical team at home so they could be contacted for advice in an emergency.

Regulate your medication to your meals

As mentioned previously, when travelling across time zones it is very easy to continue your medication but to miss your regular meals. How you should alter the timing of your insulin will depend on the stability of your condition. You should ask the advice of your specialist physician before you travel. Always carry some glucose sweets on your person in case you feel yourself entering a hypoglycaemic phase. If you do begin to feel off-colour tell somebody at an early stage so that they will know what to do for you.

Conclusion

Unless you are a very 'brittle' diabetic patient there will be very few actual restrictions on you travelling - **so long as you exercise commonsense at all times!** Meet with your doctor and discuss your plans at an early stage. Most times all that is required is a good deal of common sense.

The **Tropical Medical Bureau's web page** at www.tmb.ie has a detailed section on news and travel related reports for all countries and also information on safe travelling.

National Travel Vaccine Appointment Tel 1-850-48 76 74

Web Address: www.tmb.ie

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from W.H.O. Center for Disease Control (US) and other International sources.

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- ✓ Travel Accessories
- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

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