

Too old to travel?



Definitions

To define what is meant by 'old' is quite emotive. Many would think that anyone 20 years older than themselves is clearly within that category and obviously well past their 'sell-by' date. The era of receiving your free bus pass is being seen as the ultimate evidence of 'old age'. However for many people the older years are the first time that they have the twin joint blessings of some free time and the available resources to allow them travel to regions of the world where they have dreamt of visiting for many decades. So what holds them back and what sensible precautions should be taken? What needs to be in place to ensure they have a marvellous trip and return home with only good memories to cherish?

General Commonsense

There is a great variation of health within the older generation. For some the walking/trekking holiday is perfect and they will plan with glee the thought of daily 10 - 20km treks across mountain ranges and making a show of some of their younger travelling companions! However, for many others, the thought of having to put one foot in front of the other for more than 10 - 20 paces means shortness of breath, tightness across the chest or perhaps the aggravation of severe osteoarthritis. Commonsense would strongly suggest that all travellers (both young and old) should carefully consider what level of physical activity they wish to achieve and then plan their holiday around that one crucial element.

Medical checks

Before actually booking the holiday and paying the deposit it is wise for the older traveller to visit their doctor and discuss their plans. At that stage the GP can assess the individuals general health and see how this may possibly interfere with the proposed trip. The final decision in almost every case must be up to the traveller but they at least should listen to what the doctor thinks before making any final decision. Be honest with yourself. The GP can also see about prescribing sufficient medications to cover the time overseas and, if required, provide a medical letter which may be of immense value if the traveller needs to be seen while abroad. It is hugely important that older travellers know how they can make contact with their GP while abroad if the need should arise. (For some reason this need always occurs between Friday evening to Monday morning!)

Where to, when and why?

The older traveller planning a short family trip visiting family in an urban centre is very different to the older traveller planning to help with one of the aid agencies in a refugee camp in central Africa. Between these two extremes you have the whole gambit of why and where people travel. The planned itinerary is essential. Our home is our fortress and when we travel we potentially face situations and circumstances which were unexpected and can effect our health significantly. Knowing the location (either from an informed travel agent or a personal contact) is worth its weight in gold. For the traveller planning a 'standard' holiday to a warmer climate then issues like the duration of the flight, the expected temperature/humidity, the local level of pollution, the closeness of shopping facilities, the number of stairs to the apartment/room etc are all features which can make or break a trip abroad.

Group travel

For those older travellers planning to take part in a group trip abroad it is essential that they know something of their travelling companions. If the average group age is significantly less than their own they may feel pressurised to over-do their activities with very unpleasant consequences.

Vaccines for the older traveller

Generally there is little difference between the young and older traveller regarding their vaccines for an overseas trip. For the older traveller, their previous possible Hepatitis A exposure ('yellow jaundice') should be checked but, beside this one specific vaccine, the other risks remain very similar. For instance they may have Tetanus exposure due to falling over and cutting themselves (while the younger traveller may be adventure sporting for their injury) or Hepatitis B exposure through their slowness crossing a road leading to an accident (while the younger traveller may engage in sexual contact for their main risks) or their exposure to Rabies may be associated with a slowness in running away from a frothing dog

rather than the younger person so carefree as they cycle along with tempting exposed legs. The only particular issue is to ensure that the older traveller is in fact covered because many born before approximately 1945 will not have received any childhood vaccines and so a single injection at this stage will have little beneficial effect. They will need a complete initial course before antibody production becomes available.

Travel Insurance

Travellers in the older age bracket will more likely have an underlying health condition which could be exacerbated by long-haul travel. In these cases it is essential to know that their insurance policy will cover local medical care (including hospitalisation) and also repatriation (either as a live individual or if deceased which requires much more intervention and paperwork!). The traveller should discuss their specific requirements through with a specialised travel insurance broker and not just buy a policy from the travel agent without careful thought. Honesty in declaration is essential and the medical practitioner should not be tempted to skimp on the details of previous medical history as this may have serious financial consequences for the traveller should their policy be called into action.

Malaria prophylaxis

Assuming that there is no renal or hepatic impairment then malaria prophylaxis is basically the same for both young and old. The usual safety checks and protocols should be used at all times irrespective of the travellers age. Following their trip, the danger with the older traveller presenting with malaria symptoms is that they may be misdiagnosed due to the possibility of other factors. The younger person has the risk of not presenting in the first place!

Carrying medications

The older traveller often will be on prescribed medications. Providing these are clearly marked there should be no difficulty at customs. Occasionally, for some of the more obscure medications, it may be helpful to have a doctors letter confirming that the medications are essential and for the individual travellers personal health. Correct storage facilities may be important (insulin, various eye ointments etc) and the individual should always have a sufficient supply for their entire time abroad. It may be wise to split their supply with a travelling companion so that if one lot gets misplaced the remainder will at least keep them going while replacements are sought. A small sensible first aid kit containing antiseptic cream, corn plasters, support bandage etc may be a useful addition especially for those who will be walking a fair deal.

Special circumstances

Arthritis and back pain can be made worse through either inactivity while undertaking a long-haul flight or from uncomfortable seating arrangements at airports or on planes. Regular movement is important and the traveller should be encouraged to use the compression stockings to reduce the risk of deep venous thrombosis.

Seeing and hearing

Eyesight tends to fail with advancing years and many older people would be lost without their glasses. Travelling with only one pair (and without the prescription) is foolhardy. The lowering of hearing may also put the individual at risk as they may not be aware of warning shouts from others. This linked with slower reactions and the movement of traffic on the 'wrong side of the road' had led to many unfortunate deaths.

Too old to travel?

Not at all! In the vast majority of cases anyone can travel it just requires some suitable commonsense and planning to ensure that the individual is not taking on more than is sensible. With good doctor/patient interaction many of the potential pitfalls can be overcome and the older traveller can look forward to some well deserved escape from those overactive grandchildren for a few weeks!

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.

- ✓ 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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