

TRAVELLERS WITH DIABETES

Forward planning for the journey is an important part of your holiday preparation in order to allow you to enjoy your trip to the full and help you to avoid problems on the way.

Before you go:

Vaccinations

Allow plenty of time for a pre-travel consultation; book an appointment at least 6-8 weeks before you travel. Discuss with your practice nurse/travel clinic which vaccination you need for your trip. Diabetes isn't a contraindication to any travel vaccine but you should monitor your sugar levels closely after any vaccination.

Insurance

Ensure that you obtain comprehensive travel insurance appropriate to your chosen destination and any activities you intend to participate in. Make sure the insurance covers repatriation if necessary. Let the insurance company know that you are diabetic at the time you obtain the policy. Diabetes UK offers insurance policies designed for diabetics, further details can be obtained from them. A European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) entitles you to free or reduced rate medical care in most EU countries. You can apply for one online (www.ehic.org.uk) by phone (0845 606 2030) or by post using a form from the Post Office.

NB: The EHIC is not a substitute for adequate holiday insurance.

ID cards/bracelets

Always carry identification with you stating that you are a diabetic.

An insulin user's identity card is available from Diabetes UK (020 7424 1000, www.diabetes.org.uk)

Identification bracelets are available from MedicAlert (020 7833 3034, www.medicalert.co.uk)

Take a letter with you from your doctor (on headed notepaper) confirming that you are a diabetic, giving details of your medication. This can be useful if you are taken ill during the trip or if you have problems taking needles and syringes through customs.

Talk with a specialist

Discuss your trip with your diabetic specialist. Take details of your flight and journey times with you to advise a schedule for insulin injecting during the journey. This should take into account the crossing of time zones (i.e. whether you are travelling eastwards or westwards), the time of the journey and facilities for injecting. You should also discuss what to do if you become ill e.g. how to alter your insulin if you develop diarrhoea and vomiting. If you are going away for a long time you may have to obtain insulin locally. If so discuss the availability of insulin at your destination. Remember that U-100 strength insulin is not universally available and that U-40/U-80 insulin requires different syringes to match the insulin strength.

Travelling companion

Make sure that any travelling companions are aware that you are diabetic and can recognise and deal with the symptoms of hypoglycaemia.

What to take

- An adequate supply of insulin, syringes and blood glucose strips for the duration of the holiday plus extra to cope with any delays. To be on the safe side, take double the amount of insulin

you think you need (remember your insulin requirements may change while you are on holiday)

- A flask/cool bag to transport the insulin
- Dextrosol or glucose powder to deal with hypoglycaemia

On the Journey:

Plan in advance

Work out in advance when and where you are going to inject and when you are going to eat (the airline may be able to let you know approximate meal times).

Monitor sugar levels

Check your blood sugar levels regularly during the journey as your insulin requirements may be altered by inactivity and change in meal times.

Insulin storage

Take your insulin, syringes and blood glucose strips with you in your hand luggage. This will avoid problems if your luggage is lost or delayed. Putting insulin in the hold may cause it to freeze. Keep all medications in the correctly labelled container/box and carry a letter from your doctor giving details of your personal health and medication.

Food during the journey

Take a suitable snack with you in case of delays in your journey. Airlines may offer "diabetic meals", however it is usually better to choose the normal meal and to supplement it with extra carbohydrate that you have taken with you.

Crossing time zones

If your journey takes you across time zones, you will have to plan in advance with your diabetic specialist how this will affect your insulin requirements. Travelling eastwards (e.g. from the UK to the Far East) will shorten the day and you may need to reduce your insulin to compensate for the shorter gap between injections. Travelling westwards (e.g. from the UK to the USA) will lengthen the day and you may need an additional injection of short-acting insulin.

While you are there:

Insulin storage

Store insulin in a cool place away from direct light, where possible in a fridge. Check the appearance of the insulin before you use it.

Climate

Insulin is absorbed quicker in high temperatures. Check blood sugar levels regularly and be prepared to alter diet and medication to compensate. Remember to drink plenty of bottled water to prevent dehydration.

Activities

Activities undertaken on a holiday often mean a change to your normal daily routine. Be aware that inactivity may decrease your insulin requirements; whilst an increase in exercise may increase your insulin requirements. Check your blood sugar levels regularly and be prepared to alter diet and medication to compensate.

Food and Drink

Although the food at your destination may be different to your usual diet, it will almost certainly consist of the same basic ingredients: fruit, vegetables, meat, fish and starchy food such as bread, potatoes, rice, pasta and cereals. Take great care with food to avoid stomach upsets. **Remember Cook it, Boil it, Peel it or Forget it!** In hot climates drink plenty of bottled water or sugar free soft drinks to prevent dehydration. Be aware that some traditional drinks (e.g. Turkish coffee and tea in India) are always served sweetened. Alcohol may reduce blood sugar so it is preferable to drink alcohol with a meal.

Foot care

Keep up your usual foot care routine while on holiday – examine your feet regularly and seek medical attention if any problems arise. As feet can swell during a flight, take care that your shoes are not too tight. A comfortable pair of old shoes is preferable to new shoes, which may rub and cause sores. Avoid going barefoot and preferably do not wear open toed sandals. Use moisturiser or hand cream if your feet become dry. Remember to apply high factor sunscreen to your feet and legs to avoid sunburn.

Illness

If you become ill, check blood sugar frequently. Have frequent bland snacks. Continue to drink plenty of fluids and, if you have diarrhoea, use oral rehydration therapy, available from pharmacies in the UK, to replace lost fluids. Remember that vomiting on its own can be a symptom of severe hypoglycaemia. Seek medical attention if the diarrhoeal illness is severe or lasts for more than a few days.

Further information is available from the following sources:

Diabetes travel information – www.diabetes-travel.co.uk

Diabetes UK – www.diabetes.org.uk

Diabetes UK Careline – A confidential information service for patients (tel: 0845 120 2960)

Diabetes UK Central Office – (Tel: 0207 424 1000 –London switchboard ask for careline)

For up to date country information before you travel, visit www.fco.gov.uk