

## THE ARGYLE SURGERY

### ADVICE FOR TRAVELLERS TO HAJJ AND UMRAH

Every year over two million Muslims from around the world travel to Mecca for the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage is the largest of its kind in the world.

Travelling anywhere in the world can carry certain health risks, however there are additional health risk at Hajj or Umrah due to the gathering of large crowds and the hot climate. Preparing for your journey in advance can help to reduce the risk of falling ill during your stay.

#### **Vaccinations:**

Get the right vaccines. Don't leave your preparations too late, you will need to allow plenty of time for a pre-travel consultation with your doctor or nurse. Book an appointment at the Surgery at least 6-8 weeks before you travel. Pilgrims should ensure that they are up to date with routine immunisations including measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) and polio.

Your doctor/nurse will advise you which travel vaccines you will also need, all pilgrims to Hajj are required to show proof of vaccination against meningitis ACW<sup>135Y</sup>; this is also required for obtaining a visa.

In addition the Ministry of Health for Saudi Arabia recommends that all pilgrims to Hajj and Umrah are vaccinated against seasonal influenza.

If you are in any doubt about your vaccinations talk to your doctor or phone NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 (calls charged at local rates). NHS Direct can provide confidential interpreters, in many languages including Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Arabic, Turkish and Somali, within minutes of your call. All you need to do is state in English the language you would prefer to use.

#### **Medication:**

Pilgrims who take regular medication should make sure that they have enough supply for the whole journey.

- Keep your medication in the correctly labelled container and carry it with you in your hand luggage. You may have to check airline security requirements if taking liquids or needles/syringes on board an aircraft.
- Take a letter with you from your doctor giving the name of the medicine (both the brand name and the generic name) and what it is used for. This may help when passing through customs or if you need to seek medical attention abroad.

If you suffer from a heart or lung condition, diabetes or any other ailments tell your doctor or specialist of your travel plans, they can provide you with advice to reduce your chances of becoming ill during your journey.

All pilgrims should take a basic medical kit with them, which should include simple analgesia (pain killers), plasters, anti-diarrhoea medication and oral rehydration sachets. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

For further advice about travelling with medication, talk to your doctor or nurse.

**Food and Water Advice:**

Many illnesses, including traveller's diarrhoea are contracted through contaminated food and water. All pilgrims to Hajj are advised to follow strict food and water precautions during their stay and pay careful attention to personal hygiene. Remember **Boil it, Cook it, Peel it or Forget it!**

Dehydration can occur as a result of diarrhoea and is of particular risk in hot weather conditions. Babies, infants, the elderly and those with chronic medical conditions are especially vulnerable to dehydration.

It is advisable to carry with you treatment for dehydration and diarrhoea. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist for advice before you travel.

**Malaria:**

There is no need to take tablets for malaria when visiting Medina or Mecca as the risk of malaria is not normally present in these areas. However there is a risk of malaria in other parts of Saudi Arabia including the south-western region and rural areas of the western region.

All pilgrims are advised to take sensible precautions to avoid mosquito/insect bites during their stay. Pilgrims who plan further travel before or after Hajj to countries in Asia and Africa should seek advice about malaria prevention.

**Sun Protection:**

Avoid exposure when the sun is most harmful – normally at least two hours either side of midday. Daytime temperatures in Saudi Arabia, even during the winter months, can reach over 30°C. Associated risks include sunburn, heat exhaustion and heat stroke.

A sunscreen with sun protection factor of at least 30 should be applied regularly and liberally to exposed skin, always reapply your sunscreen after washing or swimming. Male pilgrims are not allowed to cover their heads; however an umbrella, preferably white in colour, will provide shade from the sun.

Keep babies under six months out of the sun at all times and protect your child's skin with clothing – wide brimmed hat, close woven T shirts or specialist UV clothing.

Avoid overheating and dehydration – all pilgrims should ensure that they drink plenty of clean water (preferably bottled or boiled) to avoid dehydration.

Desert sand can reach very high temperatures; good quality footwear should be worn to avoid burning the feet. Footwear must be removed during times of prayer, and to avoid losing them, pilgrims are advised to carry their footwear in a bag.

**Physical Fitness and Personal Health:**

Performing the rituals of Hajj is demanding and involves walking great distances often in hot weather. Pilgrims should ensure that they are physically fit before travelling. Minor injuries particularly to the feet are relatively common.

More serious injuries can occur as a result of stampedes as pilgrims undertake the stoning rite and other activities. Pilgrims are advised to avoid peak times, while elderly and infirm persons may wish to consider appointing a proxy for the performance of this rite.

One of the rites of Hajj is for men to have their head shaved. The Saudi authorities provide licensed barbers with a new blade for each pilgrim but other barbers may not conform to this standard. Shaving with a previously used blade could carry a risk of infections like hepatitis B or other blood borne infections. Make sure that you use a licensed barber or consider taking a disposable razor with you for this purpose.

**Insurance:**

It is important that you take out adequate travel health insurance for you and your family before you go. All pilgrims to Hajj are also advised to carry with them their GP's details which may be required should emergency medical care be necessary.

Further information is available from:

- The Department of Health National Travel Health Network and Centre  
[http://www.nathnac.org/travel/factsheets/Hajj\\_Umrah.htm](http://www.nathnac.org/travel/factsheets/Hajj_Umrah.htm)
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice to British Hajjis  
<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/your-trip/hajj-pilgrims>
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Hajj  
<http://www.hajjinformation.com/>
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Health  
<http://www.moh.gov.sa/english/index.php>
- The Muslim Council of Britain  
<http://www.mcb.org.uk>