TRAVELING WITH A chronic illness is challenging and sometimes overwhelming, especially for those suffering the effects of inflammatory bowel disease (IBD). IBD, a chronic condition without a medical cure, commonly requires a lifetime of care. Each year in the United States, IBD accounts for more than 700,000 physician visits, 100,000 hospitalizations and disability in 119,000 patients. The two most common IBDs are ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease.¹

TRAVELING by air is probably the easiest way to travel long distances with IBD.

In patients with IBD, the immune system mistakes food, bacteria and other materials in the intestines for foreign substances, causing it to attack the cells of the intestines. In the process, the body sends white blood cells into the lining of the intestines, where they produce chronic inflammation. When this happens, patients experience the symptoms of IBD: alternating diarrhea and constipation, abdominal pain, bloating, rectal bleeding, fever, spasms and nausea.

Traveling with IBD can seem daunting. A change of climate, water or diet can cause a flare-up of symptoms. However, many people with IBD are able to travel extensively, both domestically and abroad, by planning ahead.

Know Where the Restrooms Are

No one wants to be stuck at home because they can’t be very far from a restroom. Finding bathrooms locally can be a problem, but it can be even more challenging when traveling in a strange city or foreign country. Since flare-ups can cause an urgent need to use the bathroom, knowing where the bathrooms are ahead of time will help to lessen anxiety. Ask where bathrooms are upon arrival such as when being seated in a restaurant or checking into a resort, hotel or conference center.

When traveling somewhere with different bathroom customs, be aware of the differences. Some countries have pay toilets, squat toilets or toilets that flush via a mechanism on the floor or overhead. Having a basic understanding of these changes before arriving at the destination will eliminate aggravation.

Pack an emergency kit with items such as baby wipes, toilet paper, ointment, underwear and liners, deodorizer and extra pants that can easily be taken whenever going out.

Choose a Method of Travel

Traveling by air is probably the easiest way to travel long distances with IBD. The key to successful air travel is to pack properly, get an aisle seat near the bathroom, stay hydrated and ask flight attendants for assistance if needing help. Avoid visits to the lavatory during peak times such as after meals, after a movie and before landing.

Traveling by car has advantages — mainly, being able to stop whenever there is a need. A successful road trip begins with planning the travel route carefully and focusing on stopping points. Consider bringing along a portable toilet for peace of mind and convenience and to make the trip more comfortable.

Whether flying or driving, sitting for long periods of time can cause constipation or diarrhea, which can lead to uncomfortable chafing and irritation. Traveler's diarrhea can be a serious problem for people who have IBD. Avoid traveler's diarrhea by avoiding all local water in foreign countries, including ice cubes and water while brushing teeth, and eat only hot, well-cooked foods or fruits with peels that are personally peeled. Avoid unpasteurized milk and raw or undercooked meat or shellfish. And, because diarrhea often can bother the skin, bring moist towelettes for wiping, and pack an ointment such as a vitamin A and D cream to follow up. At the destination, soak in a saltwater bath to help ease soreness. Last, keep acetaminophen handy to take for discomfort.
Bring Medications

Seeing a gastroenterologist before travel may be helpful. Certain antibiotics such as Cipro can be prescribed so they are handy should traveler’s diarrhea strike. When flying, keep medications in their original containers, and pack them in carry-on luggage. Patients with an ostomy should also pack supplies in a carry-on. Carry a note from a physician listing all medications being taken under a doctor’s care; this can be especially crucial when going through customs.

Stay Hydrated

Individuals with ulcerative colitis can have a hard time absorbing water and salt in the large intestine, which can make them dehydrated quickly. Diarrhea can also cause dehydration. Therefore, it is crucial when traveling to consciously consume enough water. The goal is to drink enough water and other liquids so that thirst is quenched. Drinking an electrolyte replacement fluid may help. Avoid beverages that contain caffeine because they stimulate the intestines and can make diarrhea worse. Also avoid carbonated drinks that frequently produce gas.

Recognize when the limits have been pushed too far. Feeling dizzy or weak or not having gone to the bathroom in 12 hours are signs of serious dehydration. In those cases, immediate medical attention should be sought.

Limit Changes to Diet

An IBD flare-up can destroy a person’s appetite, which can deprive them of needed nutrients and the energy required for traveling. During a flare-up, even raw fruits and veggies can be irritating. So, skip the fatty, greasy items that are readily available and, instead, find a few go-to foods that can easily be packed into an emergency kit. In addition, rather than eating large meals at restaurants, try eating small, more frequent meals.

It’s a Matter of Planning

Traveling with IBD can be a frustrating experience, but it doesn’t have to be. Plan to travel when the disease is reasonably well-controlled. If stress makes symptoms worse, then plan the trip to be as stress-free as possible. A busy itinerary may sound great, but it can be exhausting. Exhaustion weakens the immune system and increases the risk of developing an infectious disease. Any trip takes planning; traveling with a medical condition just requires some special preparation and additional organization. As with much of life, making advanced arrangements and a little luck will help ensure a great trip!

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Reference


Sources

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• Crohn’s and Colitis UK: www.nacc.org.uk
• Trips for Travelers Who Have IBD: ibdchrons.about.com/od/travelwithibd/a/ibdabroad.htm
• WebMD Inflammatory Bowel Disease Health Center: www.webmd.com/ibd-crohns-disease
• Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation of America: www.ccfa.org/resources/traveling-with-ibd.html

Checklist Before Travelling

• Find out about insurance, vaccinations and malaria before you book your travel.
• Get a copy of all your prescription medications.
• Take enough medicines/medical supplies to cover the whole time you will be away and any possible delays.
• Ask your doctor for a medical summary and, if necessary, get a translation into the local language(s).
• Carry the contact information for your own doctor and IBD team, including phone numbers and email addresses.
• Find out details of doctors in the places you will be staying.
• Contact your hotel about en-suite and laundry facilities and any dietary requirements.
• Check availability of toilet facilities on transport you will be using and, where possible, book a seat near the toilet.
• If flying, inform the airline of any special dietary requirements. Pack your medication, any medical supplies and your emergency travel kit in your hand luggage, and check with the airline for any product restrictions.
• Pack an “in case of emergency kit.” This kit should include anything you need for an unplanned bathroom stop, or in the case of an accident: toilet paper, wet wipes and extra clothes.

Source: www.nacc.org.uk