

# Travel Tips for Those with Chronic Illness

Patients don't need to be deterred from taking a vacation just because of their illness, as long as they plan accordingly.

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**VACATIONS ARE A** great way to recharge your batteries and relax, but they take planning, even for healthy people. For those who suffer from chronic illness, planning is particularly important. How much planning is needed depends on the severity of your illness and your travel destination. Just be sure to give yourself plenty of time to avoid getting overwhelmed with the logistics. Following these tips can help you have a safe and enjoyable trip.

## Before You Go

Before making travel plans, talk with your doctor to make sure it's safe for you to travel. And, ask whether any travel restrictions are required due to your illness. For instance, depending on the severity of your condition, it might not be safe to travel to certain areas of the world.

If you are planning a trip abroad, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends a visit to a travel medicine specialist at least four to six weeks prior to departure to discuss what steps are needed to prepare.<sup>1</sup> In some instances, you may need to be vaccinated. Most vaccines are inactivated, which means they contain the killed version of the virus that causes the disease. The drawback of inactivated vaccines is they don't provide immunity (protection) as strong as live vaccines, so several doses are typically required.<sup>2</sup> Further, inactivated vaccines may not be as effective for those with weak or compromised immune systems. Your doctor can perform a blood test to determine whether the vaccine was effective for you.

Individuals with a weakened immune system should not receive live virus vaccines that contain a weakened form of the virus such as the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine and the yellow fever vaccine. This may limit where you can travel. CDC recommends you check its Travelers' Health website ([wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel)) to view which vaccines are recommended at your intended destination.

Whether you are planning travel abroad or in the U.S., you should always have a copy of your health history information sheet (HHIS), and it should be kept with you at all times. The HHIS should include:<sup>3</sup>

- Medical diagnosis
- Physician contact information
- Medications and dosages
- Emergency contact information

When packing your medication, use a pillbox. A change in daily routine increases the risk of forgetting to take medications or doubling up on them. A pillbox can also ensure you pack enough for the entire trip. It's also recommended that you include extra medication to cover delays caused by missed

flights, bad weather, etc. A good rule of thumb is to pack for at least two extra days. You should also have a copy of all your prescriptions in case you run out of or lose your medications.

If you're flying, put all your medications (in their original packaging), supplies and medical equipment in your carry-on bag. Keeping these essentials in your possession minimizes a bad situation if the airline loses your baggage. You can't count on being able to purchase your medications, particularly if you are traveling outside the U.S. For answers on how to properly transport health-related items when flying, visit [www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures](http://www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures).

In addition to your medications, insurance is of utmost importance when traveling. Keep in mind that for a trip abroad, most health insurance policies don't cover you outside the U.S. Before you leave, find out what your policy covers, and then purchase additional travelers health and evacuation insurance if needed. Insurance companies and credit card companies frequently offer these types of policies, and many even include medical flights.

Insurance for trip cancellation should also be considered. Because of the uncertainties involved with chronic illness, you need to allow for the possibility that you will be unable to travel at the last minute. To protect your investment, airlines, cruise lines and tour agencies usually offer this type of insurance.

## Transportation and Accommodations

To reduce the stress of traveling, try not to rush. The more tired you are, the less you will be able to do once you get to your destination.

Planes, trains and automobiles can take their toll. If flying, don't book connecting flights close together. Give yourself ample time to get from one gate to another without running — even if it means longer layovers. And, don't be afraid to ask for help. If you have mobility issues, contact the airline prior to departure to ask for wheelchair assistance. A wheelchair attendant can take you from the curb through security and to your boarding gate. And, if traveling with others, they can stay with you through security. An attendant can also transport you between gates for connecting flights.

If traveling by train, Amtrak ([www.amtrak.com/accessible-travel-services](http://www.amtrak.com/accessible-travel-services)) has accommodations for travelers with disabilities, including special rooms and cars for those who cannot negotiate stairs on the cars.<sup>4</sup>

No matter what your transportation mode, pack healthy snacks. Tired and hungry are a losing combination. And, be sure to drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. You can purchase

water in airports to mix with electrolyte drink such as individually sealed powder packs of Propel, Gatorade or other electrolyte drinks.

If you are doing a lot of traveling, you may be required to sit for extended periods of time. If driving, stop every two hours for a 10-minute stretching break. If flying or taking the train, take a walk to the restroom. You can also perform arm and neck stretches in your seat.<sup>4</sup>

Also, make sure the people you are traveling with are well aware of your illness. When driving, plan your route in case you may need to make frequent bathroom or rest stops along the way. If you're prone to car sickness, carry a plastic bag or garbage bag and Kleenex in case you're nauseous.

Just because you're on vacation doesn't mean you have to do everything.

When booking hotels, consider those that will accommodate your special needs. Some ideas include:

- The convenience of a hotel with a restaurant or room service can conserve precious energy at mealtimes in case you have a flare during your stay.
- A refrigerator in the room can store food, drink and medication.
- A room located near the elevator and on a lower floor allows hotel staff to help you more quickly in case of emergency.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, all public accommodations in the U.S. must comply with basic nondiscrimination policies. For hotels, this means they must provide barrier-free rooms and bathrooms and barrier-free access both inside and outside of the building. Other things you may want to request include raised toilet seats, grab bars, tub chairs and walk-in showers.<sup>5</sup>

## Take Care of Yourself

Just because you're on vacation doesn't mean you have to do everything. When you're tired, it's OK to stay at the hotel and rest while your travel companions go on that extra excursion. And, don't allow yourself to feel sad you can't do everything you might have wanted. It's better to be healthy and do some things than to try to do everything and end up sick and unable to do anything. Importantly, be sure to get your eight hours of sleep.

Eat sensibly. Part of traveling is the adventure, but the best time to experiment is not when you're out of town. Avoid overindulging and eating anything that could make you sick. For example, if you want to experience new cuisines, only do so one meal a day, and stick with simple fare for the other two meals. If possible, take along your own instant oats, breakfast bars, and nuts and dried fruits for breakfast.<sup>4</sup> Look for restaurants, health food stores, supermarkets and other places where you can purchase food that you are used to eating. Carry energy bars for times you are somewhere food is unavailable. And, once again, be sure to drink a lot of water to keep hydrated.

If swimming is on your activities list, follow these guidelines from CDC:<sup>6</sup>

- Don't swallow the water you are in or on.
- Don't swim with open cuts, abrasions or wounds. Breaks in the skin can let harmful germs into your body.
- Don't swim if you have diarrhea.
- Don't swim in cloudy water.
- Be careful about swimming or wading in fresh water. In some countries, infections such as schistosomiasis and leptospirosis are spread by contact with fresh water.

Lastly, to be prepared for the unexpected, have a bag ready in case you need to go to the hospital. Your I.C.E (in case of emergency) bag is what most individuals with chronic illness keep packed for emergency trips to the hospital. It usually includes water, snacks, books, pajamas, clean underwear, slippers and a blanket.

## Vacations Are Supposed to Be Fun, Not Work

Plan for pleasure by looking at travel brochures before you depart. Choose what looks like the most fun. Don't feel like you need to see and do everything. And, relax and rest when you need to take a break. It's not about the quantity of things you do but more about the quality. Using these travel tips will go a long way to ensuring your vacation is both enjoyable and safe! ■

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