

The Diabetic Traveler

Diabetes does not need to be an impediment to traveling the world. Most diabetics understand their bodies and how they react to different situations, better than most people. While it does make travel more complicated, there is absolutely no reason to stay home. With adequate preparation and using common sense, travel and diabetes can be very compatible.

Understanding and anticipating common health problems in both tropical and temperate climates, and being able to manage them on your own, will greatly add to a successful and enjoyable trip. Leaving without adequate preparation can only lead to problems and excess caution might keep you from enjoying “the trip of a lifetime”. Finding a balance somewhere in-between is the answer.

Start by visiting your diabetes physician about 2 months before your trip. You will need to have a letter on your doctor’s official letterhead and signed by him, stating that you are a diabetic, and are carrying syringes/medication necessary for your daily care. This will eliminate a lot of problems in customs areas both here and abroad. It is also a good idea to carry with you a summary of your medical history, and include a list of all medications with dosages. A medic alert bracelet or some other form of identification is essential. You will need to carry double the amount of medication and insulin that you normally use. It can be difficult, if not impossible to find your exact insulin in a foreign country. You will also need to double the amount of testing strips you bring, since you will need to test more frequently. An empty plastic water bottle serves well as a container to use for syringe and bloody strip disposal. Rapid or short acting insulin (e.g. Humalog) is a good idea to have with you for emergencies, even if it is not part of your normal routine. Type I diabetics need to carry glucagon, and all diabetics should have glucose tablets or gels with them at all times. These products are easy to carry and store.

After seeing your physician to assess your fitness to travel, it is time to find a Travel Medicine specialist to prepare you for the specifics of travel. You will want to do this no later than 6-8 weeks before travel. Your travel medicine specialist should focus on six main areas: (1) pre-travel immunizations specifically indicated for your destination; (2) prevention of malaria; (3) prevention and self treatment of traveler’s diarrhea (especially important for diabetics); (4) a complete briefing on those health issues not vaccine preventable; (5) products that can provide safe water, reduce your exposure to insect bites, compression hose for long flights, are among the many product items that should be addressed; and (6) health insurance for foreign travel, that also provides for emergency evacuation.

Some additional tips are:

- ❖ If you take pills to control blood sugar, no time zone adjustment is necessary while flying. Adjust your medication to the local time when reaching your destination.
- ❖ If traveling by airliner, call at least 72 hours before flying to order diabetic meals.
- ❖ Hand carry your insulin at all times.
- ❖ Consider carrying your insulin in a specially designed pack to insulate it. Insulin is generally stable even if it’s not refrigerated, but it should be kept below 86 degrees.
- ❖ Test blood glucose level at six-hour intervals or before each meal while in-flight.

I have been an insulin dependent diabetic for 20 years. I have also traveled the globe without incident. It takes extra planning and care, but it is very much worth it. There’s a glorious world out there just waiting to be discovered. With the help of your diabetic doctor, and your Passport Health travel specialist, there is no reason why you can’t start right now to explore!

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