

Travelling and medication

Taking your medication

If you are taking anti-HIV drugs you'll need to carry them with them when you travel. Customs officials often take a particular interest in medicines, and the discovery of anti-HIV drugs in the luggage of people with HIV has been the reason why many people have been refused entry to the USA and deported.

Some people get around the risk of travelling with their medication by taking the following action:

- They send their medication in advance. But make sure it arrives before you travel. Remember, post can be inspected by customs.
- Obtain medication in the country you want to travel to. However, this may not always be possible – or it could be extremely expensive.

If you carry your medication with you, have an answer ready about what the drugs are for. Some people say they are for cancer treatment. But remember, there's a reasonable chance that a customs official will have seen anti-HIV drugs before and won't be easily fooled. It might be helpful to have a letter from your doctor saying that the medicines you are carrying are for the treatment of a chronic medical condition and are for personal use. Make sure the letter doesn't mention HIV.

It might be very difficult, or even impossible, to get supplies of your medication once you've left home – even if you are just taking a short trip in the UK or Europe. So make sure you take enough of all your medicines with you to last the full duration of your trip. It might be wise to count out your medicines before you travel and to take a few additional doses just in case you get delayed.

Travelling across international time zones is likely to have implications for the time you take your medication. There are three options you may wish to consider. These include continuing to take your medicines at your UK time – but this could mean that you have to take your doses at inconvenient times. Another option is to gradually adjust the time you take your medicines, from UK time to the time in the country you are visiting. A third option might be altering your dose time to fit in with the time zone of the country you are visiting, but this could mean that there are some long intervals between doses as you adjust. It might be wise to talk over your plan with a doctor or pharmacist before you travel.

In good enough health to travel?

If you are planning a trip, then the chances are that your health will be up to it. But if you are feeling unwell, ask yourself honestly if you are in sufficiently good health to travel. Being ill away from home can be, at the very least, inconvenient, and it might be difficult to obtain specialist medical care or to come home early. What's more, if you are very ill, some airlines might refuse to carry you.

International Travel

Going to a foreign country can be daunting, as even straightforward everyday tasks may suddenly require learning a whole new set of steps. Just the strain of daily life can become stressful. In addition, you are likely to be exposed to new and potentially dangerous bugs for which your immune system will be unprepared. It is wise to have a check-up at your clinic before you go, and to ask about any extra precautions you need to take. If you are currently using any medications, ensure that you take an adequate supply with you, as they may be hard or impossible to obtain abroad. Medicines should be clearly labelled, and, at some countries' customs and immigration points, it will help to have a doctor's letter stating that you need the treatments.

It is sensible to research local medical facilities before travelling to another country, particularly if local medical care is likely to be relatively poor.

Make sure that you have the right travel and medical insurance. Most policies won't cover medical conditions that you know were aware of when you took out the policy. For more on travel insurance, see the chapter *Travel*.

Coughs are a common problem among travellers, and you may be at particular risk during air travel, when large numbers of people are confined in a small space, breathing recirculated air.

Travellers' diarrhoea is usually caused by the contamination of food or water with faecal bacteria by people who have not washed their hands. It affects about 40% of travellers to developing countries, even when they have perfectly intact immune systems, and can be a particular problem for people with HIV. The most common cause of diarrhoea after travelling is giardiasis, which can be treated quite easily in people with HIV.

Travel Insurance

General travel insurance policies generally exclude cover for pre-existing medical conditions, and some specifically exclude HIV. However it might be worth taking out cover just in case you have an illness that is unrelated to HIV, have an accident, lose your luggage or have something stolen. What's more, some insurance companies are now willing to provide cover for people with HIV. Restrictions tend to apply, and premiums are often inflated.

NAM cannot recommend any particular provider of travel insurance company. It might be wise to shop around for a range of quotes and select the insurer which most meets your specific needs.

Freedom Travel Insurance

0870 774 3760

<http://www.freedominsure.co.uk/>

Easy Travel Insurance

0870 345 2222

www.hivtravelinsurance.com

Rothwell and Towler

01404 41234

www.travelfirst.co.uk

Reciprocal medical care

If you are travelling to another EU country you should obtain an European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) before you travel. This will provide you with free or reduced cost medical care in EU and some other countries. You can apply for one online at:

www.dh.gov.uk/policyandguidance/healthadvicefortravellers

or by calling 0845 606 2030 or from a Post Office. The form will tell you the exact treatment which individual countries offer under the scheme. You may not get free medical treatment in some countries.

Vaccinations

Find out if you need any special vaccinations and if it is safe for you to receive them. Generally, people with HIV should not be given 'live' vaccines. Talk to your doctor.

Treatment breaks and travel

Do not take a break from your HIV treatments or any other medicines you have been prescribed without discussing it with your doctor in advance.

Acknowledgement: aidsmap.com