

Epilepsy and travel abroad

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Introduction

This fact sheet gives information for people with epilepsy in the UK when travelling abroad. It gives guidance on reducing the risk of seizures, anti-epileptic drugs, getting treatment, and airport restrictions.

Flying

Some people with epilepsy have concerns about flying. There is no evidence to suggest that flying is harmful, and people with epilepsy travel the world.

If your epilepsy is not completely controlled it may be advisable to let the travel agent/cabin staff know. Some airlines also have additional guidelines concerning people with epilepsy. An example might be for you to sit in an aisle seat in case you have a seizure. Further details may be available from your travel agent, or directly from the airline concerned.

Reducing the risk of seizures when travelling

Some people with epilepsy have certain things that can trigger seizures for them. These triggers include lack of sleep and changes in sleep patterns. So avoiding changes to sleep patterns, as much as possible, may reduce the risk of seizures.

Anti-epileptic drugs when travelling

When to take your anti-epileptic drugs

If practical, your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) should be taken according to your usual pattern, rather than at the time of the country you are visiting. Some people prefer to use two watches. This way, one watch can be kept at British time so you can take your AEDs by this. If you decide to do this, it may be necessary to adjust when you take your AEDS, so that you are not having to take your next dosage in the middle of the night. You could ask your GP, or specialist, for individual advice. Our guidelines can only be general and may not suit your needs.

Carrying your anti-epileptic drugs with you

When flying, if possible, carry your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) in your hand luggage, in case your main luggage is delayed or lost. There are some airport restrictions on what you are allowed to carry. (See airport restrictions below.) It's not advisable to carry large quantities of drugs, as there may be custom restrictions in the country you are visiting. It's a good idea to carry a spare prescription separately from your AEDs. The prescription proves why you are carrying the drugs. It may also be useful if you need to see a doctor about your epilepsy when you are travelling.

Storing your anti-epileptic drugs

It's important to follow the instructions for storing your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). For example, some AEDs need to be kept in a cool dry place. Heat and humidity could spoil some AEDs, making them less effective.

Airport restrictions

It's always advisable to check the hand luggage restrictions with the airport before you travel. At the time of writing, airport security measures mean that you can carry solid forms of your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs), such as tablets and capsules, in your hand luggage. They may ask you to provide evidence that the AEDs you are carrying are for your epilepsy. This evidence might be a copy of your prescription, or a doctor's letter.

You are also allowed to carry up to 100ml of liquids that are not medicines in your hand luggage. If you need to carry liquid medicines you can take more than 100ml in your hand luggage. However, you will need approval, before you travel, from the airline and airport. You will also be asked to provide evidence of your need for liquid medicines, such as a doctor's letter or prescription.

There are no restrictions about carrying liquids in your suitcase if it goes into the baggage hold. Further details about UK airport restrictions can be found on Directgov website www.direct.gov.uk

Getting supplies of your anti-epileptic drugs outside the UK

There are NHS restrictions on prescribing when someone is out of the UK for extended periods. Please see our fact sheet *Getting supplies of your anti-epileptic drugs outside the UK*.

Getting medical treatment when travelling

European Health Insurance Card (EHIC)

The UK has healthcare arrangements with other countries in the European Economic Area. These arrangements mean you may be able to get medical treatment free, or at a reduced cost, if you need it urgently while travelling. To be able to get this treatment you need the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). The EHIC authorises treatment on the same basis as that offered to the country's own citizens.

The EHIC is normally valid for three to five years. You can get an application form from the Post Office, online at www.ehic.org.uk or by telephoning 0845 606 2030. More detailed information about the EHIC can be found on the NHS Choices website www.nhs.uk

Travel insurance

It is always recommended that people take out travel insurance, no matter which country they are visiting. This is because the cost of medical care and treatment can be expensive. It's important to read any exclusion clauses on your insurance policy carefully, to make sure your epilepsy is covered. Contact Epilepsy Action for the latest information about holiday insurance for people with epilepsy.

Travel medicines

Vaccinations

It's important to receive the vaccinations that are needed for the country you intend to visit. Most vaccinations are safe for people with epilepsy or who have a history of epilepsy.

Anti-malaria medication

Anti-malaria medication could be a problem for people with epilepsy, or those who have a history of epilepsy. The Epilepsy Research Foundation produces a detailed information sheet on epilepsy and anti-malaria medication. Contact Epilepsy Research Foundation, PO Box 3004, London W4 4XT, telephone: 020 8995 4781; info@eruk.org.uk. You can also download this from their website, www.epilepsyresearch.org.uk

Information is also available from your GP (who has details of local travel clinics). Alternatively, contact MASTA Travel Health at www.masta-travel-health.com

Information in different languages

First aid information

First aid for seizures instructions are available in English, French and German, downloadable from our website: www.epilepsy.org.uk

The Traveller's Handbook for people with epilepsy, published by the International Bureau for Epilepsy, gives general travel advice, such as accommodation, insurance, driving and getting around. It also includes first aid instructions, reminders about medication and a selection of phrases. You can choose from Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. Download the language(s) of your choice from the International Bureau for Epilepsy's website: ibe-epilepsy.org

Telling people about your epilepsy

Medical records translation service

DoctorBabel is a free online service that allows you to create a personal online medical record. You can instantly translate your record into any number of languages and print out a card-sized document to carry with you. You can register on their website: www.doctorbabel.com

About this publication

This fact sheet is written by Epilepsy Action's advice and information team, with guidance and input from people living with epilepsy and medical experts. If you would like to know where our information is from, or there is anything you would like to say about the fact sheet, please contact us.

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