

Travelling with Disabilities

By Terry Fries-Maloy, MSW, LISW

Being organized and ready for the next adventure is essential for all travelers if we want our journey to be as smooth and stress free as possible. It is especially important for those travelers who may need to pay a little extra attention to detail because of increased physical or memory challenges or decreasing stamina. There are a number of helpful tips that, if followed, can enhance the travel experience and reduce the risk of an unexpected problem while away from home.

A number of years ago I started a list of “Vacation Don’t Forgets” on my computer in which I listed all of the things that I ever wanted or needed to take on vacation. It started with just the essentials – toothbrush, camera, sox, airline tickets. Over the years it has expanded and changed. It now includes “empty water bottle” (to fill at a fountain at the airport once I’ve passed through the security scanners) and “healthy snacks” (to compensate for the lack of meal service by the airlines). The year I cut myself while hiking, I added antibacterial ointment, wet wipes and bandages. I cross off “turtleneck” when I’m going to the tropics and eliminate “sandals” when I’ll be someplace colder. A few years back I added “pill minder” and “hand sanitizer.” The list works – at least for me – and I rarely find that I’ve forgotten anything when I travel. Your list may include special equipment or items needed for the treatment of your specific medical conditions.

It’s a good idea to photocopy your important documents (using the enlarging feature on the copier may be helpful) and keep the copies with you, but in a separate place from the originals. A copy of your medical history, your physician’s contact information and a list of current medications along with your passport, driver’s license, health and car insurance cards, flight information or airline tickets, and other important papers could be invaluable if the originals become lost or are stolen. It may be helpful to provide a second copy of your medical information to a traveling companion or the physician on your cruise ship at the beginning of your journey. Be sure to have emergency contact information both in your purse or wallet and in one other place such as in your luggage. Also, if you have hotel or car reservation information, a second copy of the reservation numbers, etc. could prove useful.

When I was younger I felt that trip insurance was a waste of money. “*What? Me sick?*” Now, as I grow older and see friends and family having serious bouts of illness, I see the value of such insurance especially if the vacation involves long distance or expensive travel. The extra cost of a plan that covers personal illness or injury, theft, overseas medical care (if traveling abroad), trip cancellation or damage to baggage will pay for itself if the unexpected happens.

It is important to note that Medicare and some secondary insurance carriers do not cover medical expenses outside of the U.S. and most health insurance policies don't offer coverage for medical evacuation. Be aware that if medical evacuation by air ambulance is required it is rarely covered by insurance. The cost of medical evacuation can be in excess of \$10,000. Travel insurance that covers health-related issues can help to cover some or most of the cost for medical care needed especially when traveling outside of the U.S.

If you must carry medical supplies or medications with you on a flight, it is wise to put them in your carry on luggage. If your stay is to be a lengthy one, separating your medication into your carry on and your checked baggage or giving half of your medication to a traveling partner is wise in the event that one of your bags is lost or stolen. Certain supplies, such as needles and syringes, should be packed separately as some airlines require that these items be stowed in a secure area by airline staff and given to the passenger only when needed or at the end of the flight. A letter from your physician verifying the need for certain medications or equipment (CPAP machines, dialysis equipment, etc.) may be helpful or even required.

If oxygen is necessary while traveling, plans must be made well in advance with the oxygen supplier and, if needed, the airline, bus, train or cruise service. The home oxygen supplier can arrange for additional tanks for use in car or train travel and to meet your oxygen needs at your destination. I recall a former oxygen-using client who was over the age of ninety and spent the summer on a remote island in Maine with her family. The local oxygen company arranged for portable oxygen to be used on the trip to the airport and for oxygen to be waiting for her at the destination airport for the trip to the island. A letter from her physician and advance arrangements with the airlines provided her oxygen while in flight. And the oxygen company had a supply of oxygen waiting for her when she arrived at the family island cottage. The following websites provide more information on travel with oxygen including a cruise specially designed for those using oxygen:

http://www.yourlunghealth.org/healthy_living/articles/traveling/index.cfm

<http://www.homeoxygen.org/airtrav.html>

<http://seapuffers.com/cruises.html>

Travelers with diabetes face a special set of challenges. Finding the ‘right’ foods and eating them at the ‘right’ times as well as administering medications on schedule, especially when crossing time zones, can be quite a feat. Different eating and sleeping patterns and altered activity patterns can also affect blood sugar levels making management of your diabetes even more complicated. Keeping medications at the proper temperature over extended periods of time can be difficult when traveling, though most insulin can be kept at room temperature for a period of time without significantly affecting its effectiveness. You may need to test your blood sugars more often than usual and carry special food items with you in the event your blood sugars are out of your normal range. Talk well in advance of your travel with your physician or other health care specialist to allow plenty of time for any special arrangements needed. Also consult with your doctor if your travel to a foreign country requires inoculations or immunizations as these may alter your blood sugars for a time and make diabetes management more difficult for a time. The following links offer more suggestions for those traveling with diabetes:

<http://www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes/treatment-and-care/medication/when-you-travel.html>

http://www.dlife.com/diabetes/information/daily_living/traveling_with_diabetes/

Those on hemodialysis (in-center treatments) for kidney disease can also arrange for their procedures to be done at various locations along a car travel route or at another destination location while on vacation. Arrangements must be made several months in advance and medical records must be provided along with physician orders. Staff at your dialysis center can assist you with the planning. It is wise to talk with a particular staff person at each dialysis center with which you will be dealing to be certain that they are aware of and prepared for your visit. Be sure to write down the names and phone numbers of those persons so that, if there are problems or questions when you arrive, you can refer to the person with whom you spoke for clarification. A letter from your physician certifying that you are healthy enough to travel may also be required. You may also want to be certain that the dialysis center(s) do accept your insurance and check to see if there will be any additional charges for your treatment. Those on peritoneal (in-home) dialysis can have the dialyzing solution shipped to your destination or supplied by a local provider with prior arrangement. In-home dialysis equipment and supplies can be checked in as baggage on your airline, though you may want to ask the staff at your dialysis center and the specific airlines about any special arrangements or packaging that might be required. The websites below offer more information about travel for those on dialysis.

<http://nephron.org> (for locations of dialysis centers across the United States)

<http://www.dialysisatsea.com/>

<http://www.dialysiswhilecruising.com/our-cruises/index.html>

<http://www.examiner.com/x-4898-Chicago-World-Travel-Examiner~y2009m8d9-Traveling-on-dialysis-101>

Persons using a wheelchair or a scooter should notify your airline or cruise line that you are traveling with these items and will need assistance at the airport or ship. It is important to ask the airline or cruise line for specific information about their regulations regarding your type of mobility device. When you arrive at the airline ticket counter, ask the attendant to "gate check" your wheelchair and obtain a luggage claim receipt for it. This will allow you to roll your wheelchair directly onto the plane where you can walk to your seat or transfer to an "aisle chair." Don't forget to notify your hotel or cruise line as well so that you can reserve an accessible room if one is available.

Since passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, the cruise industry has taken special steps to accommodate those with disabilities or special medical needs. Some cruise ships are equipped with special equipment such as a lift device in the pool, automatic opening doors, emergency pull cords, lowered casino tables, wheelchair 'seats' in the theater and port-of-call transportation equipped with wheelchair lifts. Some cruise lines provide specialized medical staff and even assign one staff member to attend to each disabled traveler to ensure that the cruiser's needs are met. Information regarding cruising for the physically challenged is included in the links below.

<http://www.cruise critic.com/articles.cfm?ID=105>

<http://lifecenter.ric.org/index.php?tray=content&tid=top263&cid=712>

<http://www.disabled-world.com/travel/caregivers-vacation.php>

Travel when you are physically or cognitively challenged does take extra time and planning (and often, unfortunately, extra expense), but can be a rewarding and unforgettable experience. Happy travels to all of you and don't forget to write!

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This article offers general information.
Seek a professional's advice before applying it to your specific situation.