

A travel guide for adults with sickle cell disease

Introduction

People with sickle cell disease generally adapt well to air travel, but it can create difficulties for some. For this reason, it is important to plan ahead and know about potential problems so you can take preventative measures or deal with them should they occur.

Pre-travel arrangements

Choose a travel agent that is registered with ABTA or ATOL. You will need to inform the airline, travel agent and insurance company that you have sickle cell disease. If you fail to tell the insurance company this may invalidate your travel cover.

Make sure you take out enough travel insurance. Always read the small print before you buy as you want to make sure you are fully covered for last minute cancellation due to illness or an air ambulance home if necessary. Remember that not all countries offer the same level of medical care, and in some countries (such as the USA) medical care without insurance is very expensive.

Medical advice

If you have had a painful or respiratory episode within two weeks before your journey you may be advised not to travel so please discuss travel plans with your doctor in advance. For some complications such as previous acute chest syndrome and/or ongoing low oxygen saturation levels, you are likely to be advised to have supplemental oxygen on board the flight. See below under [flying](#).

Please ask your consultant or GP for a letter explaining your medical history, **well in advance of your planned travel date**. In the event that emergency medical care is required a record of steady state blood tests (including G6PD status), past complications, pain management, allergies and other medical problems is an invaluable resource for the doctors who treat you. The letter will also have your hospital details in case the medical team back home need to be contacted.

Make sure your vaccinations are up to date. Always seek advice from your doctor or a travel clinic about extra vaccinations depending on your travel destination. Some of these will be country dependent and some will be necessary to protect you because of your sickle cell diagnosis e.g. Meningitis ACWY

Contrary to popular belief, it is possible for patients with SCD to contract severe malaria and therefore, it is important to take precautions. If you are going to stay or travel through a malarial country it is essential that you take preventive anti-malarial medicines, wear appropriate clothing and use a mosquito net. Anti-malarial medication often needs to be started 1-2 weeks before travel so please make sure you begin these arrangements early. Anti-malarials are prescribed by your GP or a travel clinic. It is important that all members of the family travelling take anti-malarial medication even if they have previously lived in a malarial country as previous immunity declines very quickly. If you have G6PD deficiency it will be important to let your GP or pharmacy know this before being prescribed anti-malarials.

IF YOU TRAVEL AGAINST MEDICAL ADVICE YOUR INSURANCE MAY BE VOID.

Travelling with medications

Pack your medication in your hand luggage. You may be asked to carry extra supplies in your suitcase. If that is the case make sure you have enough medication in your hand luggage to last for the first few days after your arrival. The letter from your doctor should state what medications you are on.

Fluid restrictions on airlines

Please note that there are fluid restrictions on airlines. Check with the airline or airport if you need to carry more than 100mls of their medication in your hand luggage.

Flying

Aeroplanes fly at altitudes of 30000-40000ft. Aircraft cabins are pressurized and this results in a lower oxygen content in air within the aeroplane. This should not cause problems for people with sickle cell disease and there is not much evidence that extra oxygen is required unless you have had chest complications. Despite this, some airlines will suggest supplemental oxygen for long haul flights (>7 hours) and will request a letter from your doctor. If you have had a previous acute chest syndrome, or have very low blood level (anaemia) and/or you have low oxygen saturation levels you will be advised to use extra oxygen inflight, you will need to request a form from the airline in plenty of time for the doctor to complete, specifying what oxygen is necessary for the flight.

Air conditioning used during flights can be cold and dry you should keep warm and drink plenty. It is also advisable for you to move around at regular intervals.

Dehydration

The air in airports and on planes tends to be dry so you will need to drink more than usual to avoid becoming dehydrated. If you are travelling to a hot country then you will need to drink more than usual.

If you develop diarrhoea do drink more water and take a supply of oral rehydration sachets eg Dioralyte which can be bought at your local chemist. Be aware of the food hygiene in the country you are visiting. If you are in any doubt about the drinking water use bottled water or sterilising tablets.

General advice

For more information on travelling abroad please contact any of the following:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Travel-immunisation/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

<https://www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo>

If you are travelling within Europe you can apply for a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) (previously known as the E111). This is for people resident in the UK. It can be used to cover any necessary medical treatment due to either an accident or

illness within the European Economic Area (EEA). The EHIC entitles the holder to state-provided medical treatment within the country they are visiting. You may wish to have additional medical travel insurance.

[Taking young children on aeroplanes: what are the risks?](http://adc.bmj.com/content/93/6/528)

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For more info: The telephone numbers below are available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm. Outside these hours, please contact your GP or go to your local Emergency Department (A&E).

Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital

Consultant Haematologist: Jo Howard / Rachel Kesse-Adu Telephone: 02071882741
Out of hours – Haematology SpR or on call consultant via switchboard
(02071887188)

Clinical Nurse Specialists: Neil Westerdale/Luhanga Musumadi / Tolu Adeosin
Telephone – 020 7188 7188 (switchboard) then bleep 1843

Kings College Hospital

Consultant Haematologist: Moji Awogbade / Sara Stuart-Smith Telephone:
02032999000 Out of hours – Haematology SpR or on call consultant via switchboard
(020 32999 000)

Clinical Nurse Specialists: Giselle Padmore-Payne and Fester Ike Telephone – 020
3299 4968

St George's Hospital

Consultant Haematologist: Elizabeth Rhodes and Julia Sikorska Telephone: 020
87250885 Out of hours Haematology SpR via Switchboard 0208 6721255

Clinical Nurse Specialists: Carol Rose Telephone – Switchboard 0208 6721255 or
07500 835735

Additional contacts can be found on the STSTN website (www.ststn.co.uk)