



## TRAVELLING AND DIABETES

HOW TO HAVE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Do you also feel the urge to travel the world? Or maybe you feel like discovering some beautiful places nearby? Great mindset! Diabetes does not have to be a burden that keeps you stuck in the same, safe environment. You can be safe elsewhere if you plan your trip carefully. But of course, unforeseen challenges can arise. In this publication you will find tips and tricks to overcome these difficulties.

So pack your bags and get out of your comfort zone! Travelling with diabetes is not always easy but it sure can make you a stronger person. You know what they say, it's not about the destination, it's the journey that matters...



# PREPARE YOUR TRIP LOGISTICS



## WHO DO I NEED TO TALK WITH?

### Your healthcare team

You should contact your doctor and healthcare team before planning your trip away. Draw up a list of questions you would like them to answer to feel fully informed and safe (adapting to the climate and time zone, injections, etc.) Make sure your ABCs (A1C, blood pressure, and cholesterol) are all in a healthy range and that you know what to do if you become ill while on holiday.

**IMPORTANT:** Discussing time zone changes with your doctor is crucial because he/she can explain to you the steps you need to take with insulin and meals depending on your specific time change.

### Talk to your diabetes association

The diabetes association of your destination country can also give you advice and answer your concerns about travelling with diabetes. You can find more information about IDF Europe's member associations [here](#).

### Your pharmacy

They can provide you with a list with the names of all medicines and dosages you take aside from your diabetes medication alone. Although you already know which insulin is fast or slow-acting, it is also a good idea to bring a list with you on your travels. In the event of an emergency, others can help you out if you are not in a position to act yourself.

While at the pharmacist you can also inform yourself about and/or buy a first aid kit.

### First aid kit

Bring a basic first aid kit with you for small emergencies. It is very important to have it with you, for example, while hiking or taking long city walks to take care of your feet (wounds).

## What should a basic first aid kit contain? <sup>2</sup>

- *Plasters in a variety of different shapes and sizes*
- *Small, medium and large sterile gauze dressings*
- *At least 2 sterile eye dressings*
- *Triangular bandages*
- *Crêpe rolled bandages*
- *Safety pins*
- *Disposable sterile gloves*
- *Tweezers*
- *Scissors*
- *Alcohol-free cleansing wipes*
- *Sticky tape*
- *Thermometer (preferably digital)*
- *Skin rash cream, such as hydrocortisone or calendula*
- *Cream or spray to relieve insect bites and stings*
- *Antiseptic cream*
- *Painkillers such as paracetamol (or infant paracetamol for children), aspirin (not to be given to children under 16), or ibuprofen*
- *Antihistamine cream or tablets*
- *Distilled water for cleaning wounds*



### **Your travel agency**

If you have booked your trip with a travel agent it is best to inform them that you have diabetes so that they can accommodate any specific needs you may have throughout your journey. Inform your travel agency or airline if you need any assistance during your flight.

**Gather information from the people around you** or travelling blogs on the internet.

## **WHICH DOCUMENTS DO I TAKE WITH ME?**

### **Travel insurance**

When living with a chronic disease, the risk of encountering medical difficulties while travelling can be greater. Before taking out an insurance plan, first, make sure that it covers conditions like diabetes. While these plans may be more expensive, it is essential to have pre-existing conditions included in your insurance. Having comprehensive travel insurance offers you better guidance and financial coverage in unexpected or unfortunate situations.

### **Travel certificate**

Ask your doctor for a travel certificate. This document explains that you have diabetes and that you need to have your medication, supplies and (drinks that contain) sugar with you (in your hand luggage), at all times.

### **European health insurance card (EHIC)<sup>1</sup>**

This is a free card that gives you access to medically necessary, state-provided, healthcare during a temporary stay in any one of the 27 EU countries, and Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, under the same conditions and at the same cost (free in some countries) as people insured in that country. Find more information on how to apply for this card [here](#).

### **Prescription and diabetes card**

Get your prescription (make sure to have one written in English) and a certificate describing all the medical supplies you need to carry with you (especially if you plan to travel by plane) from your physician. For those using sensors and/or pumps, be sure to have the medical authorisation to avoid X-rays. You can ask for one from your local diabetes association or diabetes clinic. If this is not available, ask for any other official document stating that you have diabetes.

### **TIP**

*Scan all of the official documents mentioned above and send them to your e-mail address to make sure that you have everything online and/or saved in a cloud.*



## PREPARE YOUR TRIP: MEDICAL CARE



### **Medication**

Take more supplies with you than you would normally need (at least double), and be sure to have an extra battery for your glucometer/pump. Store all your medication in containers that are labelled correctly.

**IMPORTANT:** keep your insulin (or other medication) at the right temperature at all times! While traveling with insulin, make sure that your insulin is not in an environment over 25°C for long periods of time. Once taken out of the refrigerator, when opened or carried as a spare, it can be stored within 2°C and 25°C or 30°C, but should then be used within 3, 4, 6, 8 weeks, depending on the product. Know beforehand which measures you need to undertake depending on the climate you are travelling to.

### **Ketones**

Do not forget to bring ketone testing materials with you.

### **Glucagon**

Glucagon is a hormone that is used to treat severe hypoglycaemia. It is normally administered by injection. It is a good idea to teach your travel partner how to use a Glucagon injection set. Recently a nasal spray has been released to treat severe hypoglycaemia in adults and children with diabetes aged four years and older.

### **Exotic locations**

Some areas in the world may require you to have additional vaccinations you do not need at home. Talk with your doctor about the vaccinations you may need before travelling to your destination and when you need to have them to be able to cope with any side effects.

### **Foot care**

Be sure to have the right footwear with you! Whether you plan on trekking or sightseeing, you need to have good socks and good shoes with you (that you've already tried before). Your feet are precious!

### **Supplies and devices**

Depending on the type of travelling you will be doing, you need to take some factors into consideration. Read more about it in the next chapter "transportation"

Make sure you also take a secure container with you to dispose of all used needles. You can check with your local diabetes association or pharmacist where to find 'travel size' disposal boxes for needles.

*Know the location of hospitals and doctors who speak your language or English if necessary) at your destination(s).*

## MAARTJE ROSKAMS



CAN I TRAVEL ALONE?

OF COURSE YOU CAN!

*I am Maartje Roskams from Belgium. I am 24 years old and have lived with type 1 diabetes for 8 years – time flies when you're having fun! Guidelines are so important to be aware of along the way. Preparation is key to stress-free travels. However, because diabetes is unpredictable from day to day, even with great preparation you sometimes need to be very creative and ready to deal with surprises. I gained a lot of knowledge by travelling alone because you need to cope with your diabetes 'alone' 24/7 with no one by your side to keep an eye on you or help you in an emergency. That was my biggest fear, but by taking a leap into the pool of independence it became my biggest strength. Over the years, my biggest challenge was coping with the time difference while travelling to other time zones.*

*What helped me the most was talking with my doctor about the changes that I needed to make in the settings of my insulin pump, food, sleep pattern, etc. As everybody experiences jet lag differently, I guess there is no ideal way to deal with it as a person living with diabetes. From my experience it sometimes feels like you don't have any control over it due to tiredness, change of food and other stress factors associated with a new environment. Obviously you can't change anything about these factors, however, you can check your blood glucose more often, and you can stay in contact with your healthcare professionals as well as your family virtually. You may feel scared sometimes when those things happen far away from home and in a place that you are not familiar with, but even with time changes and distance you are never really alone in this virtual world and friends are easily made when you talk to someone you trust.*

### WHAT ABOUT THOSE TIME CHANGES?

#### **If you take insulin**

If you experience jet lag due to a change of timezone, it is important to check your blood sugar as soon as possible after landing. With the time changes, you may either be very tired or wide awake, so it can be difficult to tell if you have a very low or very high glucose level because your body is confused. Be aware of this and check your blood glucose more frequently! It is okay to relax for a few days afterward to let your body adapt.

#### **If you take oral medication**

This can get a bit tricky depending on the time difference so it's a good idea to ask your doctor for advice before your trip.



# TRANSPORTATION

## FLYING AWAY

### TO DO @HOME

#### Medication

All medication must be labelled with your own name and the name of the manufacturer. You need to carry your insulin and other supplies with you at all times. It is important to follow the advice of your doctor written on your travel certificate and that of the manufacturer which is mentioned on your supplies' boxes. It is best to give this document directly to the security guards while explaining that you have diabetes.

### TO DO @THE AIRPORT

#### Security

Entering security at an airport sometimes leads to (unnecessary) discussions and misunderstandings about diabetes devices being considered 'dangerous'. This can be prevented by informing the security guards beforehand that you are carrying medical supplies. Make sure that you arrive a bit earlier than recommended as security checks with insulin and syringes might take a few extra minutes. If you experience any problems, stay calm and, if necessary, ask for the manager to come.

### TO DO ON THE PLANE

#### Where to store your insulin

You need to have all your insulin and diabetes equipment in your hand luggage on the plane rather than in the overhead compartment in case of an emergency and possible bumpy flights. Luggage zones on planes are usually pressurized and the temperature is kept at around 5°C/41°C. Check your insulin after arriving for safety. Should it appear different or unusual, replace the insulin straight away.

#### Sleeping during your flight

If you wish to sleep during your flight, make sure that you do not sleep through mealtimes or medication times. To avoid this, set an alarm on your phone/other device or ask for help from the airline crew.

#### Meals

Make sure you inform yourself before your flight and notify your airline beforehand if you want to avail yourself of any special meals for people living with diabetes.

Nevertheless, it is important to always have an additional snack or two and insulin at hand in case carb counting is difficult with an 'unknown' meal and you end up with hypo -or hyperglycaemia.

When you travel to another time zone, meals will be scheduled at a different time than you're used to so it can upset your normal meal schedule. Try to adapt your medication to the new schedule and inform yourself beforehand on how best to do that.



## ON THE ROAD

The most important aspect of travelling on the road is to check your blood sugar at regular intervals. We recommend that you do this approximately every two hours.

Do not drive if you feel the symptoms of hypoglycaemia coming on as this can be very dangerous. Park somewhere safe and wait until you feel well again.

Keep your hypo treatments close by you in the car where you can reach them easily. Don't forget to also bring your medication and food (meals, snacks, etc) with you and to take them on time. It might be a good idea to set reminders on your phone.

Some extra tips:

- Limit your driving time. After every 2 hours, you need to take a break of at least 15 minutes (where you check your blood sugar). After max. 4,5 hours on the road, you need to take a break of at least 45 minutes before you start driving again
- **IMPORTANT:** in case of hypoglycaemia, do not drive until 45 minutes after your blood sugars are back in range.
- Prepare for every eventuality (traffic jams, car issues, etc.)
- Take more food and drinks with you than you may need
- Stretch your legs on your driving breaks
- Check out the regulations of diabetes and driving in Europe [here](#).

**IMPORTANT:** Most people with diabetes can drive safely. If you experience hypoglycemia unawareness which means not being able to recognise the warnings of a hypo, driving can be dangerous. Talk to your doctor if you don't feel hypoglycaemia symptoms. Find out more about hypo unawareness [here](#).

### Autonomic/ "fight or flight"

- Shakiness
- Sweating
- Pale skin
- Palpitations and a fast pulse
- Itchy lips
- Blurred vision
- Extreme hunger
- Nausea

### Neuroglycopenic

- Dizziness
- Feeling anxious or irritable
- Crying without reason
- Tiredness
- Headache
- Lack of concentration/  
difficulty talking
- Seizures
- Coma

### Severe hypoglycaemia

When low blood sugar is not treated and you need assistance from someone to recover.

It's important to inform your travel companions about what to do in case of hypoglycaemia.



## BOAT LIFE

- It is important to have some carbohydrates in liquid form, in addition to your usual travel sickness medication, at hand if you are prone to seasickness. Inform yourself beforehand about the effects of travel sickness (e.g. dehydration, blood glucose fluctuations, etc.) and ask your doctor for advice.
- If you are going on a cruise ship, request to see the menu in advance. Discuss this beforehand with your nutritionist and plan your meals accordingly.
- Try to take advantage of the wide range of activities that cruise ships usually offer to stay physically active.

## TO HIKE OR NOT TO HIKE?

Hiking can lead you to breathtaking places and even spiritual moments that you may want to experience by yourself.

However, it is not recommended to go hiking completely alone. If you do so, make sure to tell someone where you are going and when you will return. Try to stay in touch as much as possible to make it easier to find you if things go wrong.

Higher altitudes can affect your blood glucose and your supplies! Don't forget that hiking is highly energy consuming, so make sure you have enough food and drinks with you on your trip. You may also reduce your basal as discussed and recommended by your doctor/healthcare professionals.

You can never take enough food and drinks with you while hiking! You cannot predict what will happen along the way. You may get lost and be away longer than anticipated. In this case, a lack of food and beverages can be very dangerous. Extra physical activity can also cause hypoglycaemia.

Make sure that you know the intensity of the activity you will undertake beforehand so you can adapt your meals and medication to. Have your first aid kit with you.





## BACKPACKING

CLARA HOUZELOT



*Hi there, Clara from France here! When I was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 22, I was afraid I would not be able to travel like I used to and explore remote places to be fully immersed in nature... but I did! One year after my diagnosis, I decided to explore central Asia with my boyfriend over a two-month period and make a loop around Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.*

*This meant being on the road a lot, travelling long distances, hiking in the mountains at a very high altitude (around 3000m), staying with Nomadic people with no electricity or pharmacy nearby... Planning our trip was a kind of brain-teaser as central Asia is not very "touristy" yet, so it was very hard to find information in advance (also I don't speak a word of Russian)!*

*Some key learnings:*

*As I was travelling long distance, I took more insulin than I needed and left some of it in "strategic points": Bishkek (our departure and return point) and one or two cities close to borders. If something went wrong, I could retrace my steps. I e-mailed some hostels in advance to be sure I could leave it in a bag in the fridge. The only thing that can be tricky is power cuts!*

*But I thought afterward that it would have been useful to have brought a smart thermometer for insulin.*

*We kept the Pamir area (one of the most isolated regions in the world) for the end of the trip: I just kept four pens with me, so I did not need to keep new insulin in the fridge (anyway, it would not have been possible as there is no electricity there!)*

*I would not go travelling to remote areas alone! It is important to be with a "safe person" you really trust, and who understands very well how to manage diabetes.*

*If you need more information about this trip and how to handle your diabetes while travelling, please do not hesitate to contact me! And remember: the only limits that exist are the ones we put on ourselves.*



# ON THE GO

BE THE STAR OF YOUR OWN TRAVEL  
SUCCESS STORY!

If you are travelling with a group, always tell them that you have diabetes, what it implies for you (food, tiredness in case of hypers and hypos, etc) and what to do in case of an emergency. Don't forget your glucagon and explain to them how to use it. Explain to your group that they need to call an ambulance if you lose consciousness and that it's a choking hazard to give sugar containing fluids or food to a person who is unconscious.

Keep your medicine cool: Use a cooling pack during transportation and put your medicine in a fridge if you can. But when doing so, be careful of power outages and incorrect settings which can make your insulin freeze. A transportable thermostat can be useful to make sure that your insulin is kept at the right temperature.

Check your blood sugar more often because you are not in your usual environment, eating the same food, sleeping at the same time, perhaps doing more exercise, fighting heat or cold weather, etc.

We can never say it enough: always carry some emergency food. There are a lot of healthy choices to put in your bag such as cheese, dry biscuits, fresh or dried fruit, energy bars and sandwiches. Try to take the snacks that you are used to at home with you.

Just to be safe, try to avoid drinking water from the tap in developing countries.



## WHAT CAN I DO IF THINGS GO WRONG ALONG THE WAY?

Make sure to always have a copy of your insurance contract and the number to call in case of an emergency with you and if possible store the information in the cloud. In some countries, you will need to prove you are insured to get admitted to a hospital.

If you are using a pump, be sure to plan the replacement, treatment and dosage ahead of time with your medical team. If you have any problem with your device, you will be more prepared to change to pens. If you go travelling for a long period of time (>1 month) or outside Europe, your pump provider often has special travel policies. It's always worth checking with your healthcare professionals or directly with your pump provider (website and/or customer service) whether they provide a special traveling service, e.g. a spare pump to bring on your vacation.

### If you become ill

Follow the same doctor's advice as if you were sick at home.

Being sick alone, in a strange country may cause more panic and stress than necessary. The ultimate key is to relax, take it easy and stay calm so as not to make the situation worse. Stay in contact with people at home such as your own doctor or people nearby.

If you have travel insurance, take your documents and EHIC card with you to the hospital.

*If you wish to read more about diabetes and illness, read our 'Sick Day Rules' publication [here](#).*

*I now travel with my repeat prescription leaflet which contains all my medication, my address, my doctor's address and telephone numbers and my NHS number. This is not only handy in case you do get stopped but also if you do need to buy some medication when you are away as happened to me once. I had been standing at the security belt waiting for my hand luggage when I noticed that it was going down a different direction to be checked. Then I felt a crunching noise from under my foot and looked down to see my spare vial of insulin broken. I had to buy a new one in Spain, although it wasn't quite the same, it was for a hypodermic needle and not for a pen.*

*However, I did manage even if the needle was 13mm and not my usual 5mm. I now carry a spare vial in a spare pen. Not only is this safer but it also gives me a spare pen in case I should lose or break one. When travelling I always carry a small pharmacy with me and ensure that I will have enough medication for when I am away.*

KEN TAIT

*Hi, I am Ken Tait from the UK. I have had type 2 diabetes for over 21 years and have been on insulin for all of this time. I have travelled many times by plane and I have only ever been stopped once concerning my diabetes at an airport.*



# ARE WE THERE YET?

A FEW EXTRA TIPS FOR YOU TO  
WORRY LESS AND ENJOY  
MORE 'VITAMIN SEA'!



## Storage of insulin

Make use of handy materials and supplies to keep your insulin at the right temperature. If something still goes wrong, check your spare insulin and immediately use that one.

Put half of your spare insulin (and other supplies, diabetes certificate, medication list, insurance paper, etc.) in your travel companion's luggage in case yours gets lost.

If for some reason you run out of insulin, use your English prescription to buy new insulin at the closest pharmacist. However, this is only possible in a few European countries. In other countries, you need to get a local prescription and so you must visit a doctor. In some countries, your usual insulin brand may not be available and/or not in the same dosage as you are used to. Make sure that brands and dosages are the same as you normally take.

Stay in contact with your doctor on matters such as this.

*Hi, I am Peter Nelissen from Belgium and I have been living with type 2 diabetes for six years now. An all-in formula always offers me guidance and reassurance. For example, you no longer have to look for a restaurant last minute, you can easily inquire about the ingredients when local dishes are served, etc. At the buffets, for example, there is always a wide variety of vegetables and fresh fruit and you also have the option to take a packed lunch with you on a trip. If you are going to search for a hotel, you can always contact the hotels in advance to ask what options there are for healthy food and to get breakfast options with a lower sugar index, sports facilities, etc. We always inform ourselves about the possible presence of fitness facilities; I find this very important.*

*On one vacation we experienced a shortage of medication because of a lost suitcase. This can cause some panic and you have to fully rely on the local pharmacist who can provide you with the right alternative if your usual medication is not in stock or they sell another brand for example. It is therefore important to always have a list of your medication, prescriptions and certificates from your doctor with you when travelling to other countries.*





## LET'S TRAVEL THE WORLD TOGETHER?

STEPHANIE HAACK

*Hi, I'm Stephanie from Germany. Travelling is my greatest passion and Type 1 Diabetes does not stop me from that. I've studied in Moscow, biked down Death Road in Bolivia and travelled to deserts, jungles and mountains - all with diabetes. I really believe that everything is possible with the right kind of research and preparation. Although I enjoy travelling on my own, I also love having a companion with me. My boyfriend is my safety net. He can watch out for me, especially in case I get hurt or sick. He also scores bonus points by literally taking some of the weight off my shoulders: On longer, more adventurous trips, he carries half of my diabetes supplies in his luggage. I always pack at least double the insulin and consumables, as well as spare sets of all diabetes technology.*

*So one complete set ends up with him - just in case my luggage gets lost, stolen or damaged. I know that this may seem overly cautious or paranoid, but it has actually paid off. In 2018, I was on a four-month-trip in South-East Asia. During a layover in Bangkok, my backpack got mixed up. Someone had taken my backpack and I ended up with theirs. Of course I was shocked, but at the same time relieved: I had everything that I needed in my boyfriend's backpack. I even felt a bit gratified by being proven right about my backup-planning. It all ended well by the way - by pure coincidence we both travelled onwards to Chiang Mai and were able to meet a few days later. But even if it hadn't worked out, at least my diabetes wouldn't have been a problem. My approach is this: If I'm well-prepared before my trip, I don't need to worry while travelling and can concentrate on enjoying the experience.*

### How to deal with a foreign language?

It is always a good idea to learn the phrases "I have diabetes" and "I need sugar" in the language(s) spoken in your destination country. It is also useful to have a document (or diabetes card) explaining that you have diabetes and how to react in case of an emergency in English and the language of the host country.

### Some extra tips

- Sometimes the cards you use in hotel or hostel cards are linked to the electricity and the power goes off when you leave the room with the card. A possible solution to this might be to use another card, e.g. a gym card, to keep the electricity running and to keep your insulin cool.
- To help you stay on top of your injection and meal schedules when traveling to another time zone, set your watch to the departure time until the following morning after you arrive at your destination.

*Not done reading yet? Read [this](#) blog about different challenges you may face while traveling with diabetes.*



# THE ONLY THING LEFT TO DO NOW IS TO SIT BACK, RELAX AND ENJOY YOUR JOURNEY

*Special thanks to Clara Houzelot, Stephanie Haack, Peter Nelissen, Ken Tait and Maartje Roskams for their contribution to this awareness paper.*

1. European Commission. European Health Insurance Card. From Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=559&langId=en>

2. NHS. What should I keep in my first aid kit. From NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/accidents-first-aid-and-treatments/what-should-i-keep-in-my-first-aid-kit/>



**International  
Diabetes Federation  
Europe**

