Diabetes: Travel Tips

Travel can make it hard to keep your blood sugar within your target range because of changes in time zones, meal schedules, and types of foods available.

Whenever you need to see a doctor away from home, let him or her know you have diabetes. And always wear medical identification. In an emergency, medical identification lets people know that you have diabetes so they can care for you appropriately if you are unable to speak.

General travel tips

When you are traveling:

• Take extra diabetes medicine, insulin and supplies, high and low blood sugar treatments (including a glucagon kit, if you have one), blood sugar meter batteries, test strips, and lancets. You may not find your regular supplies wherever you travel.
• Double your normal amount of needed supplies for short trips. For long trips, have enough extra supplies to last for 2 weeks more than the length of your trip.
• To keep your blood sugar at your usual level, try to eat and take your medicine as close to your regular schedule as you can.

Car travel

When you are traveling by car:

• Have snacks and drinks with you. Keep sugar-free drinks and drinks with sugar in an ice cooler.
• If needed, store your insulin in the cooler so that it will stay at a more constant temperature. Don't let the insulin touch the ice.
• Keep your blood sugar meter at room temperature. Don't leave it in a hot or cold car or in the sun.

• Walk a few minutes every 2 hours to improve the blood flow in your legs.

Plane travel

When you are flying:

• Check with your doctor, if needed, about changing your medicine dose and timing if you will travel across three or more time zones.
• Stay up to date with airport security rules. When you get ready to go through security, tell the officer that you have diabetes and are carrying diabetes supplies with you. Insulin pumps may set off alarms.
• Pack your diabetes supplies in your carry-on bag. Luggage can get lost and supplies damaged by the temperature extremes in the baggage area. You will need medical identification or a doctor's prescription for your needles and syringes to be allowed through airport security.
• Put your insulin, if needed, into a small, wide-mouth, cool, empty thermos if you are not sure that temperatures will stay in a range that is safe for your insulin.
• Put in half the air you usually add to the insulin vial, if needed, to adjust for altitude air pressure changes if you draw up your insulin while flying.
• Get up and walk every hour or so. This will help blood flow in your legs and will make sure that your insulin works properly.
• If you normally use an insulin pump, consider switching to insulin injections during your flight. The change in air pressure may alter how the pump delivers insulin. Also, because of the electronic technology, you may not be allowed to use all of the pump's features during the flight.
International travel
When you are traveling to other countries:

- Find out which immunizations are needed for your trip. Get immunized at least 3 to 4 weeks before you travel. These shots can increase your blood sugar for a short time.

- Visit your doctor if you take insulin and are traveling overseas. Ask for a letter stating that you have diabetes and need to carry syringes and other supplies with you at all times. Also, ask for an extra prescription for your insulin. Take both with you on your trip to help you pass through customs with your syringes, needles, and other injection supplies. In some countries, insulin is available in U-40 concentrations only. If you have to use this concentration, you will need to use syringes that are designed to dispense this concentration.

- Pack a small disposable container with you to hold your used lancets and needles (wide-mouth plastic soda pop or water bottles work well).

- Pack a supply of nonprescription medicines (that will not affect blood sugar levels) to treat minor illnesses such as a cold.

- Pack a language/translation book or other type of aid that will help you express your diabetes needs to others if you are traveling to a country where English is not the main language.