

Fact Sheet 36

Travelling overseas by air travel when you have epilepsy

Having epilepsy does not necessarily mean that you cannot enjoy the adventures of air travel. With planning and thought it is possible to meet your epilepsy needs and enjoy what travel has to offer. If you can travel with a friend who understands your epilepsy it makes that adventure even better.

Here are some tips to help you along the way.

1. Wear **personal identification** to alert people that you have epilepsy.

Not all seizures are epileptic. First aid responders will look for the reason for your seizure and treat you accordingly.

2. Carry **additional information** about your epilepsy in your wallet or purse. You could print the information on a small card and laminate it for safe keeping.

Your card could look like this, for example:

<p style="text-align: center;">EPILEPSY</p> <p>My name is.....</p> <p>My emergency contact person is.....</p> <p>I am staying at.....</p> <p>I am from Aotearoa New Zealand</p>

<p>My seizure (s) looks like this: (Briefly name and describe them)</p> <p>My medications are: (Name them and state how often you take them)</p>

3. Do your own research and **contact the New Zealand embassy** in the country you are about to travel. Ask:
 - a) Can I take in my current medications into the country?
 - b) How much can I take in?
 - c) What paperwork is required by customs?
 - d) Can I carry them on as hand luggage?
 - e) Do I need any special vaccinations to enter the country (or evidence of vaccinations including for covid)?

Other reliable sources of information are:

- Safe Travel: www.safetravel.govt.nz
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs: www.mfat.govt.nz/en/countries-and-regions/europe/united-kingdom/new-zealand-high-commission/safetravel/
- International society of travel medicine: www.istm.org
- Medsafe: www.medsafe.govt.nz
- Fit for Travel UK: www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk
- World Wide Health clinics: worldwise.co.nz

4. **Have a check-up with you GP to see if you are fit to travel.** You may have to provide a letter from your GP to the airline and insurance companies stating that you are okay to fly.

a) Ask your GP to write a letter stating the list of all your medications and your medical condition (s). Carry this letter, and your medications in the original packaging, in your carry-on bag. You may have to present this to customs when you arrive at your new destination. Once you are settled you may then use your pill container for your medications to help you to remember when to take them.

b) Ask your GP for a prescription for all your medications just in case you lose them or need a repeat. You would need to present this prescription to a local GP for the replacement.

Google the names of your medications as they will be called something different where you are travelling.

Keep your medications safe and cool.

c) Check that your vaccinations are up-to-date and discuss which vaccinations you may need to have before travelling overseas. It is advisable to have them several months before you go so that your body can develop immunity.

<https://www.healthnavigator.org.nz/medicines/v/vaccines-international-travel/>

<https://worldwise.co.nz/travel-vaccinations-nz-vaccination-planner/>

Check if you need anti-malaria medications where you are travelling. Some anti-malaria medications cause seizures in people with epilepsy. Get proper advice from your GP or pharmacist.

5. **Travelling through different time zones** can affect when you take your medications. Take your medications regularly in normal New Zealand time (if you live here) and gradually adjust to any time differences when you are travelling overseas. The World Clock on your smartphone can help you to keep track of any time difference. Set an alarm to remind you when to take your medications.

Your GP or pharmacist could possibly advise you on how to manage time zone adjustments.

Forgetting to take medications when you are travelling could lead you to having seizures. Be aware that travelling through different time zones can also make you suffer from jet lag. Jet lag is a temporary sleep disorder. It occurs when the body's internal clock is out of sync with cues from a new time zone.

6. Contact your pharmacist and discuss what to do if you should have a bout of **diarrhoea and/or vomiting** after you have taken your anti-seizure medications whilst travelling.

The UK guidelines are as follows but do double-check with your pharmacist if these apply to you.

- a) if you are sick within one hour of taking medication, take another dose; or
- b) if you are sick more than one hour after taking medication wait until your next dose is due before taking it.

7. **Carry a basic first aid kit:**

For more information on first aid kits for travellers visit:

<https://www.familydoctor.co.nz/categories/travel-health/first-aid-kit-for-travellers/>

Your GP can also order any kits from Worldwide Travel and prescribe them to you.

<https://worldwise.co.nz/travel-health/medical-kits/>

8. Manage your seizure triggers when travelling.

a) **Missed medications.** Set an alarm to remind you when to take them.

b) **Tiredness and sleep deprivation.** Time your air travel so you arrive at your destination in the afternoon or evening, when it's closer to bedtime, to make the transition easier. You might even want to consider a stop-over if the flight to your final destination is a lengthy one. If you like travelling with Air New Zealand you may wish to book their Skycouch: www.airnewzealand.com/skycouch

Discuss with your GP ways to manage sleep disruption and jet lag. You may wish to organize more sleep and rest breaks whilst you recover. Block out light when you are catching up on sleep with an eye mask.

c) **Stress:**

- Identify if there is a problem. You may wish to have a travel checklist to work through so that you don't become overwhelmed.

www.scti.co.nz/travel-advice/ultimate-travel-packing-checklist

- Seek help from others. You may wish to use a travel agent to arrange your flight, transport and accommodation. Flying with a travel companion is helpful especially if

you have frequent seizures.

- Try a **breathing technique** if you start to feel stressed.
- Don't over-do things. Set aside time to **relax**.

d) **Alcohol:** Drinking alcohol when flying can make you more dehydrated because of the diuretic effects of alcohol and the very dry air in the aircraft. Being dehydrated can cause seizures. Drinking alcohol can also disrupt sleep patterns which can then make you forget to take your medications. Alcohol is known to make your anti-seizure medications less effective when you take them both together.

Keep hydrated by drinking water.

9. **Carry travel insurance;** it is the peace of mind that you need whilst travelling. If you have epilepsy some insurance companies will charge you more because epilepsy is classed as a 'pre-existing medical condition'. To make sure that an insurance policy meets your needs, insurance companies will usually pass you on to their medical department. Be honest and accurate because a non-disclosure of your epilepsy may invalidate your insurance policy.
10. **Notify the airline that you have epilepsy** so that the cabin crew are aware that you may need help if you have a seizure. If you are travelling alone, you may even wish to tell the person sitting next to you that you have epilepsy
11. Let security know, when you go through customs, if you have a **vagal nerve stimulator** (VNS). Show security evidence that you have a VNS with a letter from your specialist. Airport security should not affect the VNS.

Disclaimer: this fact sheet is for education purposes only. Please consult your doctor or other health professional for advice regarding your epilepsy.