



Travel tips for the elderly - “Around the world the 80’s way”

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Introduction

“Travelling is considered ‘good medicine’ because it challenges the brain with new and different experiences and environments.”

People are living longer and there are a growing number of older people who are still physically and mentally active. According to estimates, the population of people over 60 will be one billion by 2020.

Travel is but one of the ways older people can fill their days. Spending time with family or friends (who are situated in other countries) is one of the main reasons for travel. Other reasons for travel include, but are not limited to, curiosity, greater financial freedom or taking a trip down memory lane. Older travellers generally do not take risks. Nonetheless, some may be more adventurous and embark upon adventures such as hiking at altitude or climbing Mount Everest and Mount Kilimanjaro.

This article contains a few general points to consider for older travellers and will be focusing on travelling with medications, jet lag and risks of deep venous thrombosis.

Aspects to consider when travelling

Individual patient factors such as age, pre-existing medical conditions, current state of health, current treatment, past disease exposures and vaccination history as well as the destination, season of travel, duration of stay, type of accommodation, planned activities during travel and mode of travel need to be taken into account.

Travellers (especially those travelling abroad) should be encouraged to consult a travel doctor for individual assessment four to six weeks before travelling. The doctor will be able to determine whether the older person is “fit” for travel and evaluate the need for malaria prophylaxis and vaccines (several countries have mandatory vaccine policies).

Tips for travelling with medicines

Risks related to polypharmacy include medicine interactions and side-effects, which can trigger health problems whilst away. Many older travellers use chronic medication and ideally, they should purchase all their medicine for chronic use and for the most likely self-treatable conditions such as motion sickness, jet lag, ‘travellers’ diarrhoea’ etc before leaving.

Travellers should:

- Take a copy of their prescription with them.
- Keep medicines in their original containers.
- Take enough medicine to last the trip plus extra in case of travel delays, as it may be difficult to obtain the same medicine elsewhere.

Diabetic travellers should aim to keep their sugar levels under control while travelling and they may need to plan ahead for unforeseen delays. Diabetic supplies (test strips, syringes, insulin, snacks, etc) should always be accessible and should be carried with them.

When travelling by air, medicine should be packed into a carry-on bag and, as a safeguard, a back-up supply should be packed into the check-in luggage. This will ensure uninterrupted treatment for a few days in case one of the bags goes missing. Medicines that are sensitive to temperature and pressure changes should be taken in a carry-on bag and not in the checked-in luggage.

However, one should always take country restrictions as well as airport restrictions into consideration when taking medicines across international borders. People with chronic medical conditions and those travelling with medical devices and/or implants should carry a doctor’s letter detailing their

medical condition and treatment. This may be of value should they need medical assistance abroad or need to pass security checkpoints.

Crossing over time zones

In general, travelling north-south does not significantly influence medication schedules. However, it may be necessary to adjust medication schedules for people travelling east-west, especially if six or more time zones are crossed.

Jet lag

Jet lag is a condition caused by the disruption of the body's "internal clock," which typically occurs when different time zones are crossed. Older travellers may feel the effects of jet lag more than younger travellers. Symptoms include fatigue, not feeling well, feeling sleepy during the day and having difficulty sleeping at night. Other symptoms include gastrointestinal problems, altered moods and poor concentration. These symptoms usually wear off over a few days as the body adapts to the new time zone.

If possible, those travelling long distances should consider breaking up their trip with a short stop in the middle. After arriving at the new destination, they should drink lots of water, try to eat their meals at the usual mealtime according to local time and avoid excess caffeine or alcohol. Getting some exercise and exposure to sunlight may also help to minimise the symptoms of jet lag. Those who are very sleepy during the day should only take short naps (20–30 minutes) so as not to interfere with their ability to sleep at night.

Deep venous thrombosis (DVT)

One of the concerns associated with sitting motionless for extended periods (> 4 hours) is that a blood clot may develop in a vein, known as deep vein thrombosis.

Although older people are more at risk, DVT can develop in anyone. It usually affects the leg but it can affect any limb. It is generally associated with air travel, but can occur during road travel (car or bus) or when travelling by train. Other risk factors for developing DVT include personal/family history of blood clots, known clotting disorders, obesity, recent history of surgery or injury, active cancer, chemotherapy or menopause hormone therapy.

Steps to help prevent DVT

- Flex legs regularly (every 10–15 minutes)
- Get up frequently and walk around
- Drink enough fluids
- Avoid excess alcohol
- Avoid crossing the legs while sitting
- Avoid wearing anything that may obstruct circulation such as tight shoes or knee braces

Based on individual assessment, some people may need to wear graduated stockings and/or take medication prior to departure to prevent DVT.

Early detection and treatment are vital. Anyone experiencing symptoms such as swelling, tenderness, pain or redness and

increased warmth of the skin in the affected limb (usually calf but DVT may affect other limbs) should contact a doctor.

Sometimes a piece of the blood clot can break off, travel to the lung and block one of the blood vessels in the lung. Therefore, anyone experiencing symptoms such as breathlessness, cough, chest pain, or fainting should seek medical attention immediately.

Travel tips for older travellers

"The older traveller can still climb mountains; it's just that their definition of mountains has changed considerably."

There are many biological, mental and physical changes that occur as a person ages. When advising older travellers one should always bear in mind that older travellers are more likely to have pre-existing health conditions and/or chronic diseases that may be exacerbated by travelling, for example:

- Prolonged inactivity associated with long waiting times at airports or long-distance travel as well as sitting in a confined position can result in generalised aches, pains and stiffness. This may aggravate pre-existing conditions such as backache, osteoarthritis and gout.
- Mood changes can be sparked by travel and some of the main stressors include flying and being away from home in unfamiliar surroundings. In older people, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between underlying medical conditions and an acute anxiety attack. In addition, travel may worsen symptoms in people with existing mental illness.
- People with some heart conditions or with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease may be affected by lower-oxygen environments when flying and they may require supplemental oxygen.
- Older people usually have a reduced ability to conserve/generate heat and factors such as altitude and climate could affect their health.

Among older travellers, falls are the main cause of injury. Older people also tend to have a shorter step, walk slower and tend to trip more easily on uneven surfaces. They should also be advised to:

- Use walking aids, hearing aids and spectacles (if applicable).
- Take care when walking on uneven surfaces, cobblestones and unpaved roads.
- Hold onto something sturdy when they get up and not to walk until they feel steady on their feet.
- Choose tours or activities which are realistic and appropriate for their age group or capabilities; walking distances during tours and the pace of organised tours should be taken into consideration.

Compared to younger adults, the skin of older adults is thinner, drier, less elastic, tends to bruise easily after minor trauma and may become infected more easily after superficial

abrasions, insect bites, blisters and fissures. The skin may also be less tolerant of repeated application of insect repellents, sunscreens and waterless hand sanitisers. They should be advised to:

- Wear well-fitting shoes and appropriate clothing, thus reducing the risk for cuts, tearing and blistering of the skin.
- In addition to applying sunscreen and insect repellents, older people should use appropriate barrier protection against the sun and insects (i.e. wear long sleeves and long trousers). This may help to reduce skin exposure and the need for frequent reapplication of sunscreen and insect repellents.

Last but not least, as with any traveller, the older traveller should:

- Practise safe water and food precautions
- Stay hydrated, especially in hot weather
- Wash their hands often or use alcohol-based hand sanitisers. Alternatively, they can use alcohol-free hand sanitisers, which may be gentler on their skin.

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