

# Parkinson's and travelling overseas

Parkinson's needn't stop you going on holiday overseas. Many people with Parkinson's travel regularly. However, when anyone prepares for a trip it typically involves doing quite a few little jobs before they go. If you have Parkinson's this means you may have a number of extra items on your "to do" list.

## What do I need to consider when planning a holiday?

Consider what sort of holiday suits you. For example, independent travel or would you prefer to take an organised tour? What type of accommodation would be best? Would you rather travel by rail or take internal flights?

It's advisable to chat with your GP, specialist or Community Educator about your plans. They will check if there's anything you need to consider regarding, for example, your medication – issues such as the availability of your medication in your destination country if you lose your pills.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a website with useful advice, information and tips. ([www.safetravel.govt.nz](http://www.safetravel.govt.nz)).

## How can I be clear about my needs when I book a trip?

When you book a holiday or travel, explain what you need clearly. Do not assume that people will understand what sort of assistance you may need.

The New Zealand Travel Agents Association (TAANZ) has a section on its website about health considerations when travelling overseas ([www.taanz.org.nz](http://www.taanz.org.nz)).

## What will make my stay on holiday more comfortable?

When you are booking accommodation, consider your needs. For example, can you manage stairs unaided? If you can't, you may want to check the hotel has a lift, or ask for a ground floor room. Some hotels may also be able to offer rooms that have been specifically adapted. You should ask for written confirmation that what you have asked for is available. Re-confirm the arrangements with the hotel before you leave for your trip.

If you need certain equipment such as a wheelchair or a raised toilet seat, ask the place where you are staying if they can provide this.

*"I find it is best if I change my medication regime onto local time as soon as I arrive. Trying to stay on home time just doesn't work, after all you are changing your whole body clock." KATHY*

## How can I prepare my medication before I travel?

Before you travel, ask your GP or specialist for a medical certificate or letter that explains you have Parkinson's and states the medication you are taking. You might need this for when you go through customs or if you are taken ill. Your most recent specialist's letter can also be helpful. If you are carrying syringes or needles, make sure your doctor explains why you need them in the medical certificate or letter they provide.

Ask your GP to provide you with a prescription for extra medication to cover more than the length of your trip. So if you are going on holiday for, say two weeks, take four weeks medication just in case.

You may need to check with the Embassy or High Commission of the country you are visiting to see whether there are restrictions on taking your medication into the relevant country. Always carry your medication in the original packaging and keep it in your hand luggage.

If you have a travel companion it is a good idea to ask them to also carry some of your medication in their hand luggage as a backup.

## Will I need to have vaccinations?

Depending on where you are going, you may need vaccinations to protect you against certain diseases. Your GP will be able to advise you on this, including how vaccinations may affect your condition or interact with your medication.

## Will I need to adjust my medication routine?

You may need to alter your medication regimen – especially if you are travelling across time zones. Again, talk to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's Community Educator.

## What happens if I need medical treatment while on holiday?

It's vital to have a valid travel insurance policy before you go on holiday. The policy will usually also cover non-medical emergencies, such as travel delays or the cost of replacing lost or stolen luggage.

Always check the level of cover a policy offers. Ensure the policy covers pre-existing medical conditions.

It is important to buy travel insurance as soon as you have booked your holiday not just before you leave. You will then be covered between booking and your departure date. For instance, good travel insurance policies will cover the cost of cancelling your trip if you are unwell and can't go.

## What do I need to consider before I fly?

Most airlines can offer help if you need assistance, as long as they know in advance – normally at least 48 hours before your flight. They can arrange a wheelchair escort to meet you from the car park, train station or taxi and take you through check-in. They can also arrange for you to be taken to your departure gate and boarded first. At your destination, you can be escorted off the plane and taken through passport control and customs.

Even if you don't usually use a wheelchair, you may want to consider arranging an escort at the airport. It can be particularly helpful on long flights or flights involving transfers.

*"I find wheelchair assistance at airports particularly useful. I don't use a wheelchair normally, but find long passport and security queues difficult otherwise."* KAREN

Many airlines will let you pre-book a seat on the plane, so you can choose one that is best for you. You may wish to book an aisle seat, or be close to the toilets. Some airlines will charge for pre-booking seats, so check their policy when you book your trip.

### Fluid intake

It's important to drink plenty of fluids during your flight, because pressurised cabins are dehydrating. This is particularly important if you have low blood pressure (postural hypotension). It's essential not to drink too much alcohol. Non-alcoholic drinks are needed for hydration.

### What if I also have cognitive impairment?

Travelling with cognitive impairment such as a mild dementia as well as Parkinson's is possible and can be both important and fun (for example, to family events). However, it adds an extra dimension planning wise. This advice is for plane journeys but most of it also applies to intercity bus or train trips. Travelling alone may require the airline to help with assisting the person from check-in to the plane and from the plane to the pick-up area at the destination – talk to your airline or travel agent to set this up. It's best that family or friends can assist at both ends. It is even more important to manage hydration well, to avoid alcohol, and to plan ahead for toilet stops and meals. Make sure journeys are not too long and that transfers at the destination end are short and easy, and that there is time to rest on arrival before leaping into family or tourist mode. Travel insurance needs to take account of any cognitive impairment as well as the Parkinson's. Community Educators can provide more advice if required and your GP can help if you ask.

### Airport transfers

Once you have reached your destination, you will need to arrange to get from the airport to your accommodation. It is useful to have arranged or researched this in advance. It may be useful to find out how long this transfer will be and what type of transport it will involve – a coach, train or taxi, for example. It's worth remembering that in many areas, accessible vehicles may not be available.

### How do I tell people I have Parkinson's while I'm away, if I need to?

You may find it helpful to find out how to say you have Parkinson's in the language of the country you are visiting, in case of emergency. The European Parkinson's Disease Association has an online tool that allows you to translate the phrase "I have Parkinson's. Please allow me time. In case of emergency contact..." into 25 different languages. [www.epda.eu.com](http://www.epda.eu.com)

Having the phrase written down on a card and/or wearing a MedicAlert bracelet or pendant can be very helpful in an emergency.

### Pre-travel Checklist

This is not necessarily everything you need to remember, but will help ensure you have what you need.

- Arrange for someone to drop you off and pick you up at the other end, if possible.
- Carry identification stating that you have Parkinson's.
- Learn how to tell people that you have Parkinson's and what they should do in the case of emergency, in the language(s) spoken in the country you are travelling to.
- Keep the names of your doctor, insurance company, emergency contact and medications in your wallet or purse.
- Use a waist bag or rucksack so that you have both hands free for balance as you walk, especially if you're walking any distance.
- Pack snacks and carry a water bottle to take medications.
- Wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing and good walking shoes.
- Keep up your fluid intake.
- Take into account travelling times while in places you are not familiar with. Some underground railway systems, for example, are hard to navigate and do not take into account people who may have mobility challenges.
- When making hotel bookings, request a room on the ground floor or near a lift.
- Always have at least a day's dosage of medication in your pocket or purse for easy access.
- Try to carry your medications with you in hand luggage, in case your checked luggage gets misplaced.
- If you have a travelling companion ask them to carry some medication for you as a backup.

*Have a great trip.*

Napier travel agent and Parkinson's Hawke's Bay member, Shirley Harris, spoke about travelling internationally with Parkinson's at the UPBEAT meeting in Napier at the end of August.

Shirley says doing a little research and seeking good advice can really help people with Parkinson's and their carers' holidays go much more smoothly.

Shirley, whose husband has Parkinson's, says even deciding on how far you're prepared to travel can be important – she and her husband have bitten off more than they can chew in the past, she says.

When it comes to accommodation, it pays to consider disability friendly rooms if they are an option.