

Travelling abroad with an immunodeficiency

Patient information sheet

You have told your doctor that you are planning to travel abroad. The following leaflet aims to provide you with helpful information. Because you have a primary immunodeficiency you need to take more:

- Care
- Medications
- Information
- Letters
- Insurance

Advice

A lot depends on the type of immunodeficiency that you have. Leaflets and information available at a local chemist are aimed at people with a fully functioning immune system and may be incorrect for you to follow.

Ask the immunology team about any protection that may be appropriate for you. For example: people with antibody deficiencies will not make a response to vaccinations but those with complement deficiencies will.

Care

Depending on the hygiene in the countries you will be visiting, you may have to be more careful in following basic advice about avoiding food poisoning.

Avoid unpeeled fruit and vegetables, salads, shellfish, ice-cream, ice in drinks, under-cooked meats and pates. Choose meals cooked to order rather than any food that may have been kept warm or just reheated.

Avoid tap water, even for cleaning your teeth. Choose bottled water and check the seal is intact. If this is unavailable sterilise water by boiling, tablets or filtration. If the water is highly suspect do not use it for washing your hands.

Medications

Carry a small first-aid kit with antiseptic cream and plasters. Prompt treatment of scratches and insect bites could prevent an infection. Carry insect repellent and if you are going to a malarial area take the correct anti-malarial for that region.

You may be prescribed antibiotics to carry with you in case of an infection. This would allow you to start treatment promptly, although you should still seek medical advice as soon as possible. Make sure you understand what infections the antibiotics are likely to cure.

For example, if you are normally prescribed medication for recurrent chest infections, it may be unsuitable for a bout of diarrhoea.

Author ID: Immunology/lung defence clinical nurse
Department: CCLI
Printed: September 2025
Review date: September 2027
Version: 3
Leaflet number: PI 169



Large print copies and alternative language versions of this leaflet can be made available on request.

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Do you have regular infusions of immunoglobulin?

If you are only going to be away for a few weeks, let the clinic know. This is so that your infusions can be timed just before you leave and if necessary, immediately after your return.

If you normally have infusions of immunoglobulin at home under the home therapy programme, speak to your specialist nurse to discuss management of your infusions whilst you are away.

Your hospital doctor may be able to contact a hospital or clinic in the area where you will be staying to make arrangements.

Letters

Most countries will allow you to take in drugs, needles and syringes if you have a letter from a medical practitioner explaining why you need to carry them. Getting the letter translated into the relevant languages for your itinerary is advisable.

Information

Find out as much as you can about healthcare in the countries you are planning to visit. The Embassy should be able to help.

Travel insurance

Make sure you have adequate cover that meets your healthcare needs, especially if travelling to the USA.

Check out any reciprocal arrangements with the UK and if you are visiting another European country carry a UK Global Health Insurance Card: UK GHIC.

What is a Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC)?

UK GHIC lets you get necessary state healthcare in the European Economic Area (EEA), and some other countries, on the same basis as a resident of that country. This may be free or it may require a payment equivalent to that which a local resident would pay. You can apply for a GHIC on the NHS website: nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/health-care-abroad/apply-for-a-free-uk-global-health-insurance-card-ghic/

Advice on travel insurance is available from patient organisations including:

Immunodeficiency UK

Website: immunodeficiencyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Insurance.pdf

Email: hello@immunodeficiencyuk.org

Telephone: 0800 987 8986

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