

# Travel Information for Adults with Sickle Cell Disease

**This is a guide to help you have a safe and enjoyable trip. People with sickle cell disease (SCD) generally adapt well to air travel, but it can create difficulties for some. For this reason, it is important to plan ahead and know about potential problems so that you can take preventative measures or deal with them should they occur.**

## Pre-travel arrangements

Choose a travel agent that is registered with ABTA or ATOL. You will need to inform the airline, travel agent and insurance company that you (or your child, if relevant) have sickle cell disease (SCD). If you fail to tell the insurance company this may invalidate your travel cover.

Make sure you take out enough travel insurance. Always read the small print before you buy as you want to make sure you are fully covered for last minute cancellation due to illness or an air ambulance home if necessary. Remember that not all countries offer the same level of medical care and in some countries (such as the USA) medical care without insurance is very expensive.

There are some restrictions to airline travel in late pregnancy. Please check with the airline.

## Medical advice

If you have had a crisis within the two weeks before your journey you may be advised not to travel so please discuss travel plans with your doctor in advance. You may also be advised by your doctor not to travel due to certain complications of sickle cell disease.

Always make sure you have a check-up in the haematology department at least three weeks before you travel. You may need a blood transfusion if your haemoglobin is lower than normal.

Please ask your consultant or GP for a letter explaining your medical history. In the event that emergency medical care is required, a record of past complications, pain management, allergies and other medical problems is an invaluable resource for the doctors who treat you.

Make sure your vaccinations are up to date. Always seek advice from your doctor or travel clinic about extra vaccinations or immunisations depending on your travel destination.

Contrary to popular belief it is possible for patients with SCD to contract malaria therefore it is important to take precautions. If you are going to stay or travel through a malarial country it is essential that you ask about (and take) anti-malarial drugs and use a mosquito net. Vaccinations and anti-malarial medication are not usually available from the hospital. You will need to see your GP or travel clinic about these. Anti-malarial medication often needs to be started one to two weeks before travel so please make sure you begin these arrangements early.

**IF YOU TRAVEL AGAINST MEDICAL ADVICE YOUR INSURANCE MAY BE VOID.**

## **Travelling with medications**

**IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT YOU CHECK WITH THE INDIVIDUAL AIRLINE BEFORE YOU FLY. SOME COUNTRIES ALSO HAVE RESTRICTIONS ON MEDICATIONS SO CHECK THIS TOO.**

Carry a copy of your prescription or a letter from your doctor which states the medications you take especially if you are taking a controlled drug (for example, morphine or other opiate-based pain medication). Pack your medication in your hand luggage. You may be asked to carry extra supplies in your suitcase. If that is the case make sure you have enough medication in your hand luggage to last you for the first few days after your arrival.

## **Fluid restrictions on airlines**

Please note that there are fluid restrictions on airlines. Check with the airline or airport if you need to carry more than 100mls of your medication. You may be asked to taste the medication at customs. If you take liquid penicillin you will need to keep it cool.

## **Flying**

Flying sometimes causes some people to have a sickle cell crisis because of changes in oxygen pressure levels during the flight. Some people may need to use oxygen during the flight particularly if they have lung or heart problems. Discuss this with your doctor.

Call the airline ahead of time to find out the procedures for the use of supplemental oxygen. You should be aware that the airline may automatically provide you with an extra oxygen cylinder and make a compulsory charge each way for this service.

Long journeys can increase the risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT) due to being immobile. You can reduce the risk of a DVT by preventing dehydration and by making sure you exercise your foot and calf muscles by getting up and walking around the plane at frequent intervals.

## **Dehydration**

The air in airports and on planes tends to be dry so you will need to drink more than usual to avoid becoming dehydrated. This is easy enough to prevent: drink in the airport lounge and during the flight. Avoid alcohol as this can increase dehydration.

The air conditioning on the plane and in the airport can be very cool and this will increase the likelihood of pain. Keep some warm clothing in your hand luggage and ask for extra blankets on the plane.

If you develop diarrhoea it is important not to become dehydrated, so increase the amount of fluids you drink if you do become unwell. Be aware of the food hygiene in the country you are visiting. If you are in any doubt about the drinking water use bottled water or sterilising tablets.

Remember to drink more in hot temperatures so that you do not become dehydrated.

## Your destination

People with sickle cell disease probably won't experience problems in cities with high altitudes. However, be aware that the higher you go the more likely you are to develop pain or other sickle cell related problems.

Stress and fatigue are often part of the travel experience. After arriving at a new destination be sure to limit your activities so you do not become exhausted and trigger a painful crisis. Make sure you know where the local hospital or sickle cell centre is located.

## General advice

For more information on travelling abroad please contact any of the following:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Travel-immunisation/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

<https://www.gov.uk/knowbeforeyougo>

If you are travelling within Europe you can apply for a UK Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC) (this has replaced the European Health Insurance card, formerly known as the E111). This is for people resident in the UK. It can be used to cover any necessary medical treatment due to either an accident or illness within the European Union (EU). The GHIC entitles the holder to state-provided medical treatment within the country they are visiting. You may wish to have additional medical travel insurance.

## Contact us

If you have any questions about your condition, please discuss with a member of the red cell haematology team at your next appointment or using the details below.

**Dr Elizabeth Rhodes** (sickle cell and thalassaemia consultant) **Tel:** 020 8725 0885

**Dr Julia Sikorska** (lead sickle cell and thalassaemia consultant) **Tel:** 020 8725 0885

**Carol Rose** (clinical nurse specialist) **Tel:** 07825 978812

**Sickle cell and thalassaemia secretary** **Tel:** 020 8725 0885

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

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## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

## **NHS Choices**

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

**Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## **NHS 111**

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111

## **AccessAble**

You can download accessibility guides for all of our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website ([www.accessable.co.uk](http://www.accessable.co.uk)). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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