

TAKING TO THE AIR WITH DIABETES

Published in the May/June 2002 issue of Diabetes Self Management.

Although air travel declined after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, it has, like the economy, started to revive. Some of the rules of the game have changed, however: Stepped-up airline security means longer waits in the airport and restrictions on what passengers can bring aboard the plane. For people with diabetes, it means doing some extra preparation before leaving for the airport. If you are getting on a plane, this roundup of travel tips can help you get through airport security with your diabetes supplies smoothly and maintain blood glucose control both on the ground and in the air.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is now, understandably, more cautious about what items it permits people to bring onto an aircraft. For example, these days you can't get on a plane carrying the smallest pocketknife. What does this mean for people with diabetes, who need to take lancets, syringes, and other diabetes supplies along with them? According to guidelines issued by the FAA last fall, you may bring lancets onto a plane as long as they are capped and as long as you also have a blood glucose meter embossed with the name of its manufacturer. To bring your syringes or your insulin pump on board, you'll need to produce a vial of insulin that has a preprinted pharmaceutical label identifying it as insulin. This label is usually located on the box that the vial comes in, so be sure not to throw that box away. You'll need to carry your glucagon kit in its original container with its preprinted label on it as well. Without printed pharmacy labels, you won't be able to take your supplies on the plane. Because of the ease of forgery, airport security personnel won't accept a prescription or a letter from your physician stating that you require diabetes supplies.

Going through an airline security check may require some patience on your part. Some security personnel may not be all that familiar with, say, an insulin pump, so be ready to explain what your supplies are and how they are used. Take note that the FAA regulations apply only to travel within the United States; international travel regulations may differ. If you're headed for a foreign country, call your airline ahead of time to find out whether there are any additional requirements or restrictions. In addition, FAA regulations are subject to change, so it's a good idea to call your airline a day before your flight to confirm them.

Be sure to pack insulin, syringes, pills, meter, and lancets in your carry-on luggage, not in the bags you check. This way you'll have the supplies you need for the flight, and you won't be stuck if your checked baggage gets delayed or lost. Bring twice the amount of supplies that you think you'll need, in case anything gets broken.

When packing insulin, remember that it should, ideally, be refrigerated at a temperature between 36°F and 46°F. If you're going to use a vial within 30 days, however, you can store it at room temperature (lower than 86°F). After the month is up, throw away the unrefrigerated insulin you haven't used and open a new (refrigerated) vial. People who travel a lot might consider investing in an insulin carrying case, which usually comes with a cooling mechanism, pouches for holding your meter, syringes, and other items, and a shoulder or hip strap. Travelers might also want to consider using an insulin pen instead of the conventional syringe and

vial. An insulin pen has a needle at one end and contains a prefilled insulin cartridge. Many travelers find pens convenient because they're small, light, and portable.

Time is another important consideration for travelers with diabetes. It takes longer to pass through security these days, which is why airlines now advise you to arrive at the airport two hours before a domestic flight. Waiting a long time at a checkpoint or a ticket counter can disrupt your eating schedule and lead to hypoglycemia, or low blood glucose. For this reason, it's wise to anticipate delays and bring along drinks and snacks, such as juice, crackers, fruit, and pretzels. International flights may involve even greater security and longer waits than domestic flights, so plan accordingly.

In addition, in-flight meals are not as common as they once were. If you're going to need to eat something while you're in the air, make sure you find out in advance from your airline whether or not a meal will be served. If not, bring food with you. Flight attendants might be willing to heat up the food you bring along if you ask them. Be prepared to have security personnel examine your foodstuffs before you board the plane. They may ask you to take a sip of any beverage you wish to carry aboard.

When you're traveling internationally, you may cross several time zones. This can throw off your schedule, especially if you use insulin. Before you depart, you should discuss how to deal with the time issue with your health-care provider. There is no single rule to follow for adjusting your insulin while traveling across time zones, but the main goal is to avoid hypoglycemia. If you're traveling east, your day can be cut short, so you may need to shorten the time between pills or insulin injections, or you may need to lower the dose. If you're headed west, your day can be much longer, and you may have an extra meal that requires an extra dose of insulin. Discuss how to adjust the timing and dose of your insulin or oral diabetes medicine with your health-care provider. Some people find it easier to stay on schedule if they keep their watch set to the local time of their departure city for the day that they travel. It might even help to carry two timepieces: one set to your home time and the other set to the local time wherever you are.

When you reach your destination, there are still some things to keep in mind. Many tourists are a lot more active on their vacations than they are at home. Be sure to take your increased activity into account when you're planning your meals and insulin injections. When you're more active, your body burns more fuel, and you may need to lower your insulin dose or have an extra snack to avoid hypoglycemia.

This News & Notes item was written by Joseph Gustaitis, a freelance writer and editor in New York City.