

Diabetes and long haul flights

General points

Diet managed diabetes

No special precautions or changes to routine needed

Tablet managed diabetes

All tablets used in diabetes management are long-acting, so stick as nearly as possible to your normal intervals between doses (once daily, twice daily, or three times daily). If you take tablets before meals and the interval between meals is substantially shorter than usual, miss out the dose. If your tablets are the kind that are taken after meals (Metformin) take them once twice or three times daily as you normally would – you are not likely to have a hypo with these tablets.

Insulin managed diabetes

This is much more complicated, so we have prepared separate sheets for travel to the Far East and travel to the West (e.g. Caribbean, USA, Canada) where you will be crossing time zones.

If you are traveling south (Africa, S. Africa) the time difference will only be an hour or two and you should stick as nearly as possible to your usual home routine. You are not likely to have any problems because of time difference.

General points:

Make sure that you take insulin and the means to give it, blood testing equipment, dextrose tablets and extra snacks with you on the plane. You may need a letter from the doctor to confirm that you need these items with you – especially since Sept 11th, and particularly for flights to the USA.

Bear in mind that airline meals are generally fairly low in calories – averaging around 350 calories. You may need to supplement this (hence the snacks) or reduce your insulin.

If you are not already using a separate short acting insulin your doctor may recommend that you take some with you to supplement your usual insulin. We are now most often recommending the very quick acting insulins such as Humalog and Novorapid because with these you do not have to leave an interval of 20-30 minutes between the insulin and the food, but can take them either with, or even if necessary straight after your food.

Make sure that you take sufficient insulin, testing strips and any other medication that you need for the duration of the trip. Your insulin will be fine stored out of a fridge for up to a month. Ask your nurse or doctor for advice if your trip is longer than this or if you are traveling to very hot areas.

Insulin and long haul flights

Travelling from UK to West (e.g. USA / Canada/ Caribbean)

General points:

Diet easily goes astray (especially in USA!) and different levels of activity on holiday may cause hypoglycaemia or hyperglycaemia – depending on whether you are more active on holiday or less so.

Make sure you know how to manage illness – ask for the “Sick-day rules” or advice from your doctor or nurse if you are unsure.

Time changes on long distance flights as well as changes in routine may cause some upset in diabetic control for a few days. This rarely is of any long-term significance, but try to avoid the extremes – especially avoid hypos, which are not easy to manage on an aircraft! If in doubt let your sugar levels run a bit high for a day or two.

Managing insulin doses:

Outward travel

Travelling west from UK, the day is lengthened and you are likely to need extra doses of short acting insulin (we usually recommend Humalog or Novorapid) which can be given at the same time as eating, thus avoiding having to wait 20-30 minutes after injecting, before eating. Usually 4-8 units before a meal is enough, but ask your doctor or nurse for specific advice.

Precise advice will depend on your usual insulin regime, your doses and the time of day that you are flying. As an example, suppose that your flight to the USA leaves at 11am and you are on twice-daily injections of short and medium acting insulin. You might need to make the following adjustments:

Have normal morning insulin dose.

Check blood sugar before meals. You are likely to need some insulin with or before your afternoon / evening meal. Give 4-8 units of short acting insulin. Thereafter check blood sugar before each mealtime and before going to sleep – give 4-8 units short acting insulin depending on blood levels

On arrival – take usual doses of insulin at same time as you would at home, or as nearly as possible. In other words, you will have used the extra doses of short acting insulin to cover the additional period of time until you are into the local routine, within the new time zone.

Homeward travel:

This time the day will be shorter – you will need to either eat extra, or better slightly reduce your insulin doses until you are back into your normal routine. Using the above example, and assuming an overnight flight back to the UK (a frequent option) –

Reduce normal evening dose of insulin by 20%. Check blood sugar frequently – before food and before going to sleep on the plane. If low, eat some long acting carbohydrate and check after 2 hours if in doubt. Keep to holiday time and give morning insulin (again less 20%) before breakfast on the plane.

Once back home, settle into your normal routine as soon as possible – checking your blood sugar more frequently in the first few days.

Finally – have a good holiday – don't forget your diabetes, but don't let it stop you having a good break