

EAT. TEST. FLY. KEEPING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Estonie Yuen
Dietitian

National Healthcare Group Polyclinics



Having diabetes should not prevent you from enjoying travelling. Whether for work or pleasure, travel can be hassle-free with just a little bit more preparation. Do ensure that you still have regular meal times and eat healthy.

Low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia) can strike any time and food access during travel is sometimes unpredictable. Be sure to check your glucose level if you feel unwell and experience symptoms of low blood sugar such as dizziness, cold sweat, trembling hands and weakness.

While travelling, it is still essential to have your medication and or insulin injection, snacks and meals on time.

On long-haul flights, keep watch on the time of the place of departure (origin) and keep to the usual routine. For instance, if you are on two injections per day, eat at approximately the same times as usual. It may be necessary to get some extra carbohydrate to make this possible especially if your meal time is delayed; keep some healthy snacks with you.

Overseas travel is also a good time to try different foods but sometimes we tend to overeat. Choose wisely from local menus and eat a balanced diet.

Rules of thumb

1. Eat a bigger portion of vegetables (or around half of your plate).
2. Fill a quarter of your plate with carbohydrates (preferably whole-grains) such as rice, noodles and potato. Consult your dietitian to get individualised advice on your carbohydrate needs from a particular meal.
3. Fill a quarter of your plate with protein such as lean meats, skinless chicken, fish, lentils, beans, tofu or nuts.
4. Choose water over sugar-sweetened drinks.

If you are on insulin injection and you need to cross time zones, your insulin dosing and timing may need to be readjusted, and so too your food portion and meal time. It is best to seek medical advice in advance and discuss your travel plan with you doctor.

“Over-pack” medications

Going for a week? Pack two weeks' worth of your diabetes medications in case of travel delays, loss and damage, or misplaced supplies (insulin, syringes, testing strips, etc).

Whenever necessary, get a memo from your doctor verifying that you need to carry needles or medical equipment in case you get stopped by airport security. Keep your medications and supplies close at hand and do not put them in checked luggage or in the trunk, where they can be exposed to extreme temperatures (too hot or too cold).

Insulin should not be placed in checked baggage. It can be affected by severe changes in pressure and temperature. At your destination, store your insulin in a cool place as soon as possible. Inspect your insulin before injecting each dose. Seek help from a

doctor if you notice anything unusual about the appearance of the insulin or if you notice that your insulin needs are changing.

Test often

New foods with variety of ingredients, increased activity and different time zones can throw your glucose levels out of whack, so be sure to test frequently (including before and after meals). If you take insulin, keeping your blood glucose levels steady can be tricky when changing time zones; make a plan to adjust your schedule for injecting. Before your trip, seek advice from your doctor, care manager, or dietitian to help you with this challenging process.

Carry snacks and hypoglycaemia management

Low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia) can strike any time and food access during travel is sometimes unpredictable. Be sure to check your glucose level if you feel unwell and experience symptoms of low blood sugar such as dizziness, cold sweat, trembling hands and weakness. Please note that some people with frequent hypoglycaemia and long-standing diabetes may not experience those typical symptoms. It is therefore important to check your blood glucose regularly for early detection. Let your travelling companion know about your condition and how to treat hypoglycaemia.

If the blood sugar is lower than 4 mmol/L, take your glucose tablets immediately. Otherwise, eat or drink something immediately and this can be:

3 sweets (not sugar-free), or

3 teaspoons of sugar (you may carry sugar packets in your bag), or

½ can of regular soft drinks or isotonic drinks

Wait for 15 minutes, then check your blood glucose level again. Once it returns to higher than 4 mmol/L, take your next meal or mid-meal if it is due in half an hour. Otherwise, take some biscuits with cheese, peanut butter crackers, or half a sandwich if your next meal is more than an hour away.

Finally, prepare for a health emergency

Get a memo from your Doctor for insulin or oral medication in case of an emergency. Prior to an overseas trip, get a list of local English-speaking doctors. Otherwise, ask your hotel to recommend a local doctor who treats diabetes. It would also be useful to know where the nearest medical centres, hospital and pharmacies are.