

# International travel, medications and security

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Fear of terrorism in the post 9/11 era has led to tighter travel security restrictions. The latest requirements may have implications for some patients.

As a direct result of a foiled international terrorist plot involving aircraft in August 2006, Australia has introduced new security measures relating to carry-on hand baggage. These new measures will affect anyone flying to or from Australia or travelling within Australia on international flights and may have particularly important implications for travellers who need to carry medications. It is important for medical practitioners to be familiar with the latest restrictions and the need to supply patients with the relevant certification to be able to travel without encountering difficulties. The new security measures are similar to those introduced in the UK, the USA, Canada and the European Union (in which countries they apply to both domestic and international flights).

## New restrictions

Since 31 March 2007 passengers on international flights to and from Australia and within Australia have been restricted to carrying only small amounts of items, aerosols and gels in their carry-on baggage. The aim of the new restrictions is to reduce the opportunity for individuals to combine readily available liquids into potentially lethal substances in-flight. The latest restrictions cover creams, perfumes, sprays, gels, toothpaste and other similar substances (Table 1).<sup>1</sup>

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Each container in which those items are carried on board must be less than 100 millilitres and all containers must fit comfortably into one resealable, transparent plastic bag with a volume no larger than one litre; the allowance is one bag per passenger. Clipseal-type bags of this volume measure approximately 20 x 20 cm and can be purchased at most supermarkets. There are no changes to existing rules about the amount or types of substances passengers can carry in baggage that is 'checked-in' and stored in the aircraft hold during a flight.

## Exceptions may apply

Exceptions to the new rules will be made for medications and foods needed during a flight but conditions apply to these exemptions. For example, baby formula, milk and baby foods in small containers can be exempt from the new limits, only in quantities required for the trip (see Table 2). In these cases, such items can be carried outside of the prescribed one litre bag limit. Any drinks or other liquids purchased from shops (including duty free shops) on the secure side of the airport are allowed on board.

All items – including exempt items – may be subject to additional security checks if the passenger is transiting or transferring to other flights at an intermediate airport. Requirements do vary between airlines and country checkpoints.

In general, airlines also exempt medically necessary needles and syringes from

these prohibitions providing passengers carry prescription medication with a professionally printed label identifying the medical office, pharmacy or manufacturer of the medication. In other words, medications should be retained in their original packaging with their attached labels when patients travel.

## Patient documentation

A prescription or letter from a medical practitioner detailing the traveller's medical needs, medications and special food requirements is strongly advised. This

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**Table 1. Restricted hand luggage items**

Liquids, aerosols and gels that are restricted to 100 mL in volume for carriage in hand luggage include:

- Aerosols, including shaving foam and deodorants
- Contact lens solutions
- Creams, lotions, oils
- Hair gel
- Hair spray
- Insect repellent
- Liquid cosmetics, including mascara
- Perfume
- Shampoo
- Suntan lotion
- Toothpaste
- Water, other drinks, soups and syrups
- Other items of similar consistency

## Table 2. Exemptions to on-board liquid restrictions

The following liquids, foods and medications are exempt from the on-board 100 mL volume limit:

- Baby formula/milk and baby food
- Medications (liquid, gel or aerosol)
- Liquids, juices or gels for passengers with diabetes

documentation not only is useful for placating security staff but also makes good sense in case a patient requires medical care while overseas. Medical centres specialising in travel health can also provide appropriate documentation.<sup>2</sup> For travellers carrying syringes, Epipens or insulin and blood glucose meters with finger lancets, carrying documentation is especially important.

### Insulin and sharps

Some airlines may refuse to store insulin in their on-board fridges; however, Diabetes UK advises that most types of insulin can be stored at room temperature for up to one month without losing their effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> Qantas Airways recommends that travellers declare syringes and needles at airport screening points. It states that 'under Australian law (and in accordance with international practices) hypodermic needles are classified as prohibited items within an aircraft cabin unless you can demonstrate a *bona fide* need to have them in your possession. Travellers are therefore required to carry documentation and identification to confirm that the needles are required for a medical condition'.<sup>4</sup>

Although some airlines advise travellers to take only enough medication for the flight, in the case of insulin, problems may arise. Diabetes Australia advises that all insulin be transported in carry-on luggage because freezing temperatures in the aircraft hold may damage insulin supplies. It also recommends carrying insulin in

hand luggage to avoid the potential loss of insulin supplies in case stowed luggage is mislaid. The Diabetes Australia website ([www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)) contains some helpful travel tips, as does the American Diabetes Association website ([www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org)).<sup>5,6</sup>

British Airways points out that as security screening at airports varies, when patients with diabetes travel they should have discussed with their doctor and have ready a contingency plan to enable them to travel safely in the unlikely event that authorities do not allow their equipment to be carried in cabin baggage.<sup>7</sup> This means patients must ensure they carry enough supplies for the flight, but that they also have the address of a relevant pharmacy and medical centre at their destination.

In view of the increasing reports of counterfeit medications available overseas, travellers should avoid relying on overseas suppliers for their medications, especially in third world countries.<sup>8</sup>

### Devices and prostheses

Travellers with devices and prostheses such as syringe pumps, indwelling catheters, pacemakers and metal plates or screws should ensure they carry a physician's letter detailing their medical situation and requirements. These patient's should also endeavour to arrive earlier than usual for flights in order to plan for the likelihood of longer delays at airport security checkpoints. It is important that travellers remember that they have the right to request a separate room or private area to discuss their medical situation.

### PBS restrictions

Under the current Australian National Health Act (1958), it is important for medical practitioners to ensure their patients are aware that it is an offence to carry (or post) PBS medicines overseas unless they are for personal use or use by an accompanying traveller. Only Australian residents living in Australia at the time a PBS pre-

## Advice for travellers taking medications overseas

- Minimise the number of medications in your carry-on baggage
- Keep all medicines in their original packaging with a legible dispensing label
- Carry an original prescription and/or doctor's letter or certificate with you
- Divide medications between different luggage pieces
- Make medications easily accessible for customs' checks
- Check with your travel agents and airlines for any specific restrictions at your destination
- Check for specific restrictions with the embassy or consulate of your destination country

scription is dispensed are entitled to receive PBS subsidised medication, and there are restrictions on the amount of PBS medicine that can be carried or sent overseas. These restrictions do not apply to medications not subsidised under the PBS, but it is important to check that medications are legal in the country of destination by checking with that country's embassy or high commission.<sup>9</sup>

Although there are international guidelines for regulations concerning travellers undergoing treatment with narcotics and psychotropic medications, countries are able to introduce any regulations they please. It is therefore extremely difficult for such travellers to plan their journey.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Despite spurious anecdotal reports of travellers being harassed over carrying routine medications, travellers need to be reassured that the vast majority of people will have no problems carrying their usual prescription medications across borders. This is provided they declare their medications at the border if requested, and

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continued

provide adequate certification in the form of a prescription and/or a physician's letter. Customs officials look for illegally used medications and seek to ensure standard security procedures are followed.

The new international airport security guidelines, while increasingly bureaucratic, have been considered necessary by world governments and are here to stay, sadly. Hopefully, they will go some way to keeping travel safer for us all. **MT**

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## Further reading

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