

Transplant and travel

A kidney transplant can offer greater freedom and flexibility to travel, especially when compared to dialysis. After transplant, you have the option to enjoy activities that were once difficult while unwell or on dialysis.

The choice of travel destination does not need to be limited to big cities or popular tourist destinations. With careful planning and advice from your kidney doctor and a travel medicine expert, you can safely explore many parts of the world.

What are the travel risks for transplant recipients?

If you have received a kidney transplant, there are certain risks to be wary of when travelling. Depending on where you are travelling and what activities you are doing, your risk for falling ill while on holiday can vary.

Due to your transplant, your risks during travel include:

- **A weakened immune system:** due to the anti-rejection medicines used to prevent your body from rejecting your transplant.
- **An increased risk for travel-related infections:** such as traveller's diarrhoea, lung infections, malaria, and other illnesses. Your weakened immune system can put you at risk.
- **Limits on vaccines:** some travel-related vaccines are not recommended for kidney transplant recipients.

Because of these risks, it is best to wait at least **one year after your transplant** before travelling overseas, unless approved by your doctor.



High risk destinations

Developing countries lack the same food and cleanliness standards we have in Australia. Areas with unclean water or less strict hygiene can put you at risk for infections. These destinations have a higher risk to your health:

- Africa, Asia, Central and South America, Middle East, Pacific Islands
- Developing countries
- Tropical regions

High risk activities

We all have a thirst for adventure, but some activities have underlying risks. Some examples include:

- Staying in rural areas with lack of access to medical care
- Eating or drinking from markets or roadside stalls can put you at risk for food poisoning
- Engaging in high impact sports like activities caving, dirt biking, or ziplining

Types of infections

Depending on the destination, travellers may encounter:

- **Food and waterborne illness:** including cholera, hepatitis A, or typhoid
- **Vector-borne infections:** spread from insects or animals, such as malaria from mosquitoes or encephalitis from ticks
- **Airborne-infections:** such as influenza and COVID-19

Here are some general tips to prevent infections overseas:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Choose bottled water over tap water.
- Eat foods that have been thoroughly cooked and wash fresh fruits and veg with bottled water. Avoid street foods where food preparation standards are lacking.
- Consider wiping airplane seats, your phone, and other high-touch objects with anti-bacterial cleansing wipes.
- Use bug sprays in areas with mosquitoes and check for ticks in high-risk destinations.
- Get a pre-travel health risk assessment and obtain any needed vaccines or prevention medicines before you go.



Pre-travel health risk assessment

An important part of preparing for travel is getting a health risk assessment. It's a good idea to book in with your doctor before you go. Be sure to have a full assessment by a travel medicine expert along with your kidney doctor or transplant surgeon at **least six months before your trip.**

Here's a quick checklist for your visit:

- ✓ Ask for an up-to-date treatment letter with your health conditions, blood test results, and medications.
- ✓ Get any needed vaccines.
- ✓ Stock up on an extra supply of medications to last through your trip. Bring an extra supply (at least two weeks' worth) in case of delays.
- ✓ Print and bring any customs forms or travel documents needed for your visit.
- ✓ Ask about what to do if you experience illness or have signs of transplant rejection while travelling.

Discuss your travel plans with your doctor at least six months prior to leaving so that you have enough time to be properly vaccinated.

Travel vaccinations

Vaccines contain weakened or parts of a disease-causing germ. They are given to activate the body's natural defences (immune system) to help build up immunity against the virus or bacteria.

The need for pre-travel vaccinations will depend on your destination, time since transplant, and the risk of catching a particular disease. The risk of damage to your transplanted kidney by each vaccine will also be considered.

Ideally, your routine and childhood vaccinations should be up to date before your transplant happens. You may need an additional dose, called a booster dose, to protect you when you've had a kidney transplant or are on anti-rejection medications.

Vaccination for transplanted travellers

Different countries can have different vaccination recommendations. These vaccines vary based on your age, your vaccination history, and the location of travel.

It is best to discuss your vaccine needs with a travel medicine expert, pharmacist or your kidney doctor to determine which vaccines you need.


Malaria prevention

Malaria is spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. It's most common in parts of Asia, Africa, South America, and the South Pacific. If you are travelling to an area that has malaria, you may need to take anti-malaria tablets to prevent the disease.

Some malaria medicines can interact with your anti-rejection medicines. Your doctor or travel medicine expert can determine which anti-malaria medicines are best for you based on your travel destination and current medicines.

Follow these tips to prevent mosquito bites when travelling:

- Use bug spray with mosquito repellent.
- Use mosquito nets or screens that have been treated with permethrin (a chemical to kill bugs).
- Wear long sleeve, long leg, loose, light-coloured clothing.
- Avoid being outside when mosquitos are feeding, at dusk and dawn.
- Stay in places with screened windows and doors.
- Take medicines to prevent malaria if recommended by your doctor.



Protect yourself against mosquitos when travelling to areas with high rates of malaria.

Traveller's diarrhoea

Traveller's diarrhoea is the **most common disease in travellers**. Bacteria causing traveller's diarrhoea are commonly spread through infected food and water. You may notice 3 or more loose stools (poos) in 24 hours, stomach pains, and nausea or vomiting.

Its impact is more severe and more serious in people with weakened immune systems. Diarrhoea can change the blood levels of your anti-rejection medicines:

- Dehydration causes increased blood levels of medications because you have less fluids in your body. Higher blood levels of medications may lead to toxic side-effects.
- Dehydration also flushes the medicines out of your gut causing lower blood levels of medications. This means your medicines are less likely to work which can increase your risk for transplant rejection.

Preventing and treating traveller's diarrhoea

Before you leave, discuss with your doctor whether you should take some antibiotics with you so you can start treatment if you get traveller's diarrhoea.

You can prevent traveller's diarrhoea by washing your hands before eating, avoiding tap water, and choosing foods that have been thoroughly cooked. Drink plenty of bottled water or hydration drinks if you fall ill. Staying hydrated is key to protecting your kidneys.

You should seek medical attention if you start to have traveller's diarrhoea so the doctor can prescribe antibiotic medicines. Tell any new doctor you see which medicines you take and that you had a kidney transplant.

There are also medicines available without a prescription to reduce the symptoms of diarrhoea, such as loperamide (GastroStop). Ask your doctor before using these medicines.

Other illnesses while travelling

Other common traveller's illnesses are:

- lung infections, like COVID-19 and the flu
- urinary tract infections and yeast infections
- skin infections and sunburn
- altitude sickness

Infections can be treated early if you have the correct antibiotics with you. Your travel medicine doctor, kidney doctor, or your GP can provide prescriptions and instructions on when and how to use these medications. If you are not prescribed an emergency supply of antibiotics, seek medical help if you fall ill.

Transplant recipients have a higher risk of skin cancer, so protecting yourself from the sun is essential. Use plenty of sunscreen and wear protective clothing on your trip.

Your doctor can prescribe 'as-needed' medicines to help you if you fall ill during holiday.

Altitude sickness

Altitude sickness leads to nausea, vomiting, and dizziness at high elevations >2500 meters above sea level. Avoid long hikes and hard physical activities the first few days to help you adjust to the change in altitude.

Medicines may help but have risky side-effects in people that have received a transplant and may not be suitable for everyone. Talk to your doctor about treating altitude sickness, especially if you are travelling to an area with high altitudes, like the mountains of Peru, China, or Nepal.

Medication issues

Many of your anti-rejection medications may interact with the medicines used to treat traveller's diarrhoea, skin and lung infections, and altitude sickness. In addition, many of the tablets used for malaria prevention can interact with anti-rejection medicines, making them more toxic.

You will need to carry an adequate supply of all medicines. Create a schedule for taking your medicines with your pharmacist if you travel across time zones.

If you need healthcare services while on holiday, be sure to tell the doctor treating you about your kidney transplant, all medical conditions, and the medicines that you are taking.



In case of emergency

Before you go away, map out your destination's closest hospital and kidney transplant center. Always carry a list of your medications and medical history. Check out the next page for a fillable sheet to carry with you during travels.

Consider purchasing a travel insurance plan to help cover medical costs in case of emergencies.

Travel insurance

Travel insurance with health coverage is so important when travelling overseas.

Some insurance companies require a medical assessment before providing coverage. It may be hard to secure travel insurance coverage if you had a transplant. Be sure to review the wording of the insurance policy carefully before you travel.

Check out if the country you are travelling to has a **Reciprocal Health Care Agreement** with Australia. These countries may allow you to use publicly funded care while travelling. Visit servicesaustralia.gov.au for more information.

Additional travel information

- **Kidney Health Australia:** Visit kidneyhealth4life.org to join our free wellness program and learn more about living well with kidney disease.
- **Smart Traveller:** has general travel information about destinations and planning at smartraveller.gov.au
- **World Health Organisation:** get international travel and health information at who.int/travel-advice
- **Transplant Australia:** for travel tips specific to transplant recipients visit transplant.org.au/living-with-your-transplant/self-care/vaccinations-and-travel



Things to remember:

- ✓ **Transplant and anti-rejection medicines weaken your immune system** and can put you at risk for infections when travelling.
- ✓ **It is important you have a health risk assessment before travelling.** Your doctor will tell you if you are **clear to travel** and which vaccines are important for your trip.
- ✓ **You should always carry a full list of your medicines and medical history with you when travelling.**

What does that word mean?

Antibiotics – A medication used to treat and prevent a variety of bacterial infections and disease.

Anti-rejection medications – Medicines to control your immune system that is needed for as long as your transplanted kidney functions, to reduce the risk of your body rejecting your new kidney.

Dehydration – When you do not have enough fluids in your body. If dehydration is severe, it can cause serious problems and you may need to go to hospital.

Immune system – A collection of special cells and chemicals that fight infection-causing agents such as bacteria and viruses.


Kidney transplant – A treatment for kidney failure. During a kidney transplant, a kidney is removed from the body of one person (the donor) and put into the body of the person with kidney failure.

Toxic – Something that is harmful or dangerous.

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) – Is a bacterial infection that can affect the urethra, bladder or kidneys. It may cause pain when urinating and wanting to urinate more frequently. Treatment with antibiotics may be needed.

 **Kidney Health**
Australia

Free Kidney Helpline 1800 454 363
kidney.org.au

If you have a hearing or speech impairment, contact the National Relay Service on 1800 555 677 or relayservice.com.au. Have them connect you to the Free Kidney Helpline - 1800 454 363 



**WANT TO
LEARN MORE?**

Kidney Health 4 Life is a health and wellbeing program equipping people, and those that care for them, with the knowledge and resources to take more active management of their kidney health or kidney disease.



**Join Kidney Health 4 Life
by scanning the QR code**

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your doctor's or health professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information is relevant to the reader and applicable to each state in Australia. It should be noted that Kidney Health Australia recognises that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the health professional and the state one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your doctor or health professional.

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