

## **Travelling with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (Or ...The Guts to Travel?)**

Travel means many things to many people. IBD affects people differently. A successful trip for one person, may be a recipe for disaster for another. Many of the challenges of travelling with IBD will be the same whether travelling within Australia or Overseas.

As with much of life, forward planning and a little luck will help ensure a great trip. Try to plan your trip when your disease is reasonably well controlled.

### **Choice of Destination**

Are 'flare ups' a distinct possibility? In that case you might need fast access to medical care? Will there be local factors likely to aggravate your condition?

You may find it useful to consult a Travel Medicine Doctor to discuss your travel plans before you make your booking. They will have a good knowledge of the area you are planning to visit, the common hazards and the type of medical facilities available.

Most importantly ...Do you want to go there? Research your destination – read books, watch videos, attend slide nights so you do not find out on arrival that it is really not your 'cup of tea'.

### **Choice of Trip Style**

Aside from your affinity for creature comforts, consider the following.

1. Choose your accommodation to suit you *and your gut* ...e.g. an ensuite or attached bathroom may not be a luxury but a necessity. Many cheaper types of accommodation have communal facilities – sometimes on a different floor.
2. If stress makes your symptoms worse, then plan your trip to be as stress free as possible. A busy itinerary may sound great because you 'get to see a lot of things', however you may feel so exhausted, you cannot enjoy them. If you are exhausted, your immune system will be weakened and you will be more likely to develop infectious disease or have an accident. Many of the best travel experiences are unplanned – planning 'time to be idle' may increase your enjoyment and allows magic moments to sit and watch the world go by or interact with the locals.
3. Escorted vs. independent is very much a personal choice. Don't dismiss escorted tours too quickly. These days there are escorted tours to suit even the most adventurous. If you find the right sort of tour – it saves time and worry making 'arrangements' and allows more time to enjoy the experience. The group leader will know how to access medical care, know where the toilets are etc.

### **Choice of Mode of Travel**

This can be crucial – if toilet access is crucial – it sounds obvious but don't plan long bus tours unless you know there is a toilet on board. 'Comfort stops' or 'Toilet stops' may not be convenient for your bowel. If you may need access to more specialised medical care, or hospital, consider carefully before you take a cruise – it is very hard to get off a ship at sea. For air travel you may find it easier to request a special meal and an aisle seat. Some people have commented they 'do not eat' on the plane or they take stoppers (e.g. Loperamide) before travel to decrease the need for toilet access. Some people find a motor home with toilet a good way to maintain their sense of independence.

### **Get Travel Insurance**

Make sure you have insurance organised before you pay for your airtickets etc. If you pay for tickets and insurance, and the insurance is refused, you will not be able to get back the money for your other travel arrangements if you opt not to go.

Try to obtain extra cover for your IBD as a pre-existing disease if possible. Not all companies provide cover for pre-existing diseases. You or your doctor fills in a form from the insurer. Doctors or nurses who work for the

insurance company usually assess your application. They review applications on a case by case basis and are looking to get a feel for you, your disease and your destination.

For example; they are unlikely to cover someone with unstable disease in the last 6 months who wishes to go trekking in a remote part of Nepal for 6 months but would cover a person with reasonably stable disease visiting New Zealand for 3 weeks to stay in a resort.

Some insurers will refuse if you apply 6 months before departure – in case you get a terrible attack in the interim, but if you reapply just before departure, they may accept it. Just because one insurer refuses you, don't be deterred. Some companies have a set fee (e.g. \$50) for all and every preexisting condition. You may be able to get cover with another company.

Even if you cannot get IBD cover, you can still have an accident or develop other medical problems, which may worsen your IBD. The passport office has a slogan .. "If you can't afford travel insurance, you can't afford to travel"

### **Obtain from your own doctor**

1. A letter outlining your IBD Medical history in medical terms
2. A written management plan outlining what you should do for mild, moderate and /or severe symptoms, what symptoms should make you seek medical attention immediately etc
3. Plenty of your normal medication including treatment for the worst you have been e.g. steroids. ( In Australia the Doctor can write REG 24 on a script, which will allow you to pick up several months, supply at once if you are going to be away for a while.)
4. Adequate supplies of 'appliances' if necessary
5. Your Doctors phone number is they are happy to give it – (Some doctors will charge for a phone consultation but it can be very worthwhile) Your doctor knows your condition best and he or she may be able to head off a problem with some advice over the phone. This is most reassuring for many persons.

### **Visit a Travel Doctor**

This will ensure you have the most up to date information on the health risks of your destination. The Travel health consultation will ensure you know how to look after yourself in that particular environment. Ideally the first consultation should be undertaken at least 8 weeks before departure in case vaccinations are necessary. This will allow time for vaccinations to take effect and side effects to subside before departure.

A comprehensive traveller's medical kit should be organised. 50% of travellers will suffer minor health problems, which are easily treated with the right medical kit. The four most common health problems that travellers face are

1. Diarrhoea and gut problems
2. Respiratory problems
3. Wounds
4. Pain

Your medical kit should be able to deal effectively with these common things. Special antibiotics for gut infections will be especially important to anyone with a history of IBD.

### **While away**

Be careful with your diet – avoid unsafe foods. The simple rule to remember is BOIL IT, COOK IT, PEEL IT OR FORGET IT. This applies double to those with a delicate gut! This sort of care with food will decrease your risk of picking up a nasty bowel infection – gastro, Bali belly, travellers trots, pharaoh's revenge etc. Also, avoid foods that you know aggravate your bowel. Be especially conscious of maintaining your fluid intake. Don't solve the problem of unsafe water by not drinking anything. Bottled water is readily available just about everywhere.

**IF you develop a bowel related problem while away...**

Call for medical advice early. Follow your management plan from your GP. Ring your doctor if necessary. Even if you do not have extra cover for IBD, your insurance company can provide 'non-financial' assistance. E.g. tell you where to go to get good quality medical care. Early treatment may prevent your problem developing into an emergency. You may also have a travel bowel problem rather than an IBD bowel problem, and it may be covered.

**Finally**

I would like to thank all those affected by IBD who responded to my survey and taught me a little about the challenges of travel with their disease. I strongly believe that with adequate planning, both you and your bowel can enjoy a wonderful and positive travel experience.