

Travel medicine and medical travel



Canada 67 Mowat Avenue, Suite 036 Toronto, Ontario M6K 3E3 (416) 652-0137
USA 1623 Military Road, #279 a Niagara Falls, New York 14304-174 5 (716) 754-4883
New Zealand 206 Papanui Road Christchurch 5
www.iamat.org | info@iamat.org

Medical travel and travel medicine. What's the difference? Similar name, different medical specialty. You can understand the confusion. Chances are you have heard these terms before, largely due to the prominence of low-cost, affordable international travel. But what exactly are medical travel and travel medicine?

Medical travel (also known as medical tourism, global healthcare, and health tourism), involves patients who seek healthcare abroad for a variety of reasons, including the high cost of medical treatments and long waiting times back home, their insurance plans do not cover certain procedures, or they want quick access to cutting-edge medical technology available in other countries.

Normally encompassing elective procedures such as cosmetic surgery, dental surgery, fertility or alternative medicine treatments, medical tourism is becoming increasingly popular for patients requiring life-saving procedures like heart or kidney transplants, as well as knee or hip replacements. Often, patients combine their medical care with vacation time, usually in warm-climate destinations.

Travel medicine (also known as travel health), on the other hand, focuses on preventing injuries and the spread of infectious diseases during international travel. This multi-disciplinary field touches on several medical disciplines including preventive medicine, emergency care, immunology, epidemiology, mental health, gastroenterology, and dermatology. A travel health practitioner is also knowledgeable of world geography, the health environment, and the socio-cultural customs of the traveller's destination.

The three components of travel medicine are:

The individual traveller: Your age, past and current health status, underlying chronic health conditions, budget for medications and vaccinations.

The risks: Your destination, visits to rural or remote areas, type of travel – business, adventure, leisure, long-term working assignment – epidemics and general health of the population where you will be visiting.

The intervention: Vaccination and medication recommendations, general health advice, including food and water safety, and insect-bite prevention methods.

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For many travellers, doing research on the health risks of your destination, visiting your doctor for advice, or going to a travel health clinic to get vaccinated may seem like a daunting task. After all, we intrepid travellers just want to hop on a plane and start our adventure. However, things that many of us take for granted or consider an inconvenience of international travel such as time zone changes, barometric pressure, or poor air quality, do affect our health and may lead to complications if you have pre-existing health problems.

It's not only diseases such as yellow fever, dengue fever, or malaria that should be of concern. Mental health, sunburns, traveller's diarrhea, heat stroke, traffic accidents, trauma such as falls or near-drowning, and prescription refills during travel are all in the purview of travel medicine. Depending on your health and risk at your destination, it is not uncommon for travel health practitioners to advise travellers to postpone a trip, change your itinerary, or not travel at all.

Typically, medical travel also has three components:

Research: Finding the medical tourism provider and exploring the standard of care you will be receiving abroad, including whether the facility is accredited by a reputable third party and if the doctor speaks your language, is licensed and qualified for the procedure; and finding out if the medications provided are legal and safe.

Communication: Providing your medical reports, your medical history, and your doctor's opinion; discussing the type of treatment and cost, duration of stay, including post-surgery care and follow-up mechanisms to deal with complications; and exploring if your insurance company will pay for post-procedure care if complications arise back home.

Legalities: Signing contracts, coordinating entry Visa requirements, organizing travel and accommodation logistics; finding out your legal recourse if your procedure goes wrong, including the malpractice and patient protection laws of your destination country.

In this fast growing industry more companies are now offering full medical travel packages helping patients find the appropriate medical facility and doctors, including arranging travel and accommodation. Some insurance companies are also starting to venture into the medical tourism field. However, concern over medical liability and malpractice suits abroad means that medical travel patients continue to incur out-of-pocket expenses for their procedures.

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Medical tourism and travel medicine cross paths when medical travel patients are exposed to infectious diseases during their stay abroad. Depending on your health status, you may be at higher risk of contracting an infection such as antibiotic resistant MRSA (Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus), hepatitis A, typhoid fever, influenza, or even tuberculosis - diseases that are uncommon back home, but are endemic in other countries.

Popular medical tourism destinations such as China, Brazil, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama, and Thailand, for example, all have malaria risk in certain regions of their country. If you are considering doing sightseeing in the surrounding area, it is prudent to know what risks you may encounter. Moreover, whether you are convalescing in a state-of-the-art facility or not, like any traveller, it's important to consider the food and water safety of your facility since your body needs to adjust to the new environment.

Medical travel, travel medicine, or not... International travel has social, economic, and political implications on local populations. If you are a traveller seeking medical care abroad, or if you become ill during your trip, your health status impacts the local healthcare system. Being a responsible traveller means being well prepared, weighing the risks involved, and leaving the smallest footprint you can behind. 