If you have arthritis, there is nothing to stop you planning and enjoying a trip abroad. This factsheet gives some tips for how to be well-informed and well-prepared before you go, and what particular travel arrangements you may need to make.

Insurance

It is a good idea to book travel insurance for any trip abroad, to book well in advance, and to shop around for a good deal. A huge range of options are available, at different prices and offering varying degrees of cover.

Always check the terms and conditions of any policy to be sure you’re getting the cover you need, and be up front about telling your insurer that you have arthritis. You may need to take out a specialist travel insurance policy, and this may not be the cheapest option, but is important to be fully covered for any eventuality. If you were to have a flare-up while away and needed treatment, you could find yourself not covered if you had not declared your arthritis at the outset.

If you are travelling in Europe and are aged 16 or over, you can apply for the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC).* This will give you access to state-provided healthcare during a temporary stay in another European Economic Area (EEA) country, or in Switzerland. It entitles you to treatment that is medically necessary until you return home, including the treatment of pre-existing conditions such as arthritis. However, it is important to note that an EHIC is not an alternative to a travel insurance policy. For example, a travel insurance policy would usually cover air ambulance provision, or lost or stolen property, but the EHIC does not. The EHIC is also not valid on cruises.

* At the time of writing, the EHIC is still current and valid, but as the UK prepares to leave the European Union, this may change. Keep an eye on current advice at nhs.uk/NHSEngland/Healthcareabroad/EHIC/Pages/about-the-ehic.aspx
Travelling with a companion

However you travel, if you are not self-reliant, you must travel with a companion.

Airlines, ferries or trains will usually try to make sure that you and your companion sit next to each other. Always try to give as much notice as possible. As a guide, aim to give at least 48 hours’ notice before departure.

On many airlines, companions may travel at a reduced rate. For travel by ferry or cruise ship, tour operators may require you to be accompanied by another person able to provide you with assistance. If this is the case, the assistant can travel for free on a ferry, but not on a cruise.

Always check with your travel provider what options or restrictions they have in place.

Medication

You may take controlled medicines abroad with you, but some restrictions apply and there are a number of things you will need to bear in mind.

Before you go

- Discuss your travel plans with your doctor, so that they can advise on appropriate medications and vaccinations needed for your chosen destination and period of travel.
- Notify your airline or tour operator in advance if you will be carrying large amounts of medication or syringes in your luggage. Some security checks, particularly at airports, may have specific requirements for how medicines must be carried.
- In preparation for any trip, you will need to obtain a note from your GP explaining what your medication is and why you need it. At airports, for example, if you are carrying syringes in your luggage and you don’t have a doctor’s letter, you are unlikely to be able to board an aircraft.
- Prepare a diary or chart of when you need to take medication and if you going to be travelling across time zones, check in advance with your nurse or consultant if time differences matter.
- If you are going to need a fridge in your room for storing medication, speak to the hotel or accommodation manager in advance to ensure this can be arranged.
- When you know where you will be staying, find out where the nearest pharmacy, surgery or hospital is located in case you should need it.

Packing considerations

- Be sure to take with you all the medication that you will need for the length of your trip, with some extra to guard against running out if you should experience any delay.
- Always carry prescribed medicines in the original, correctly labelled packaging.
- Pack your medication in your hand luggage so that you have it with you at all times, and keep your hand luggage in as convenient a place as possible. For example, keep it under your seat rather than in an overhead locker, so that you don’t have to stretch to reach it.
- Never pack medication in a suitcase that you might not be able to access for a long period of time. Bear in mind that travel delays do happen, so even if you think you should be reunited with your main luggage by a certain time, you might not.
- Using a pill box can help keep medication organised, and a drawstring bag may be more convenient and more immediately accessible than a zipped bag.
Air travel

When you book a flight, inform the airline about your arthritis and discuss any help you may need. Different airports and airlines have different facilities, so check in advance if what they have fits your specific needs.

If your arthritis affects your mobility, note that you have the right to the following at European airports:

• Help at terminal entrances, car parks and transport interchanges.
• Help to reach and proceed through check-in and registration.
• Help with moving through the airport.

You are also entitled to travel with up to two items of mobility equipment free of charge – this will not count towards your baggage allowance.

Your airline will liaise with the airport operator to provide the support you need at the airport.

Tips for a stress-free airport experience

• Get a head start by picking up tickets and boarding passes in advance. For example, you can avoid having to stand in long queues by taking advantage of ‘pre-boarding’. This is the period before ‘general boarding’, and allows those who need extra time getting on the plane to get seated before others board.
• If your flight is not direct but involves changes, be careful to incorporate enough time for you to make the change comfortably.

Taking a wheelchair on a plane

You will not be able to take your wheelchair into the passenger cabin – it will be put in the hold. Find out before you travel what assistance is provided when boarding.

If you use an electric or battery-powered chair, you will need to let your airline, travel agent or tour operator know as soon as possible.

During the flight

Consider taking anything that may make your journey more comfortable, for example a holding cane, a folding reacher or grabber, or an extra pillow to help with back support.
Travel by cruise ship or ferry

If you have reduced mobility and you are travelling on a cruise ship or ferry that departs from the UK or anywhere in the European Union (EU), the EU gives you certain rights. These rights apply at all stages – before, during and after travel, as well as in ports that have staffed terminals.

Ferry operators and cruise operators should not refuse you access on the grounds of any disability. Importantly, however, there are two circumstances in which access may be denied:

• if allowing you on board conflicts with certain legal safety requirements (such as any international, EU or national law, or safety requirements established by various authorities), for example, if there is a legal requirement to be able to evacuate all passengers in an emergency within 30 minutes; or
• if the physical layout of the ship, or the design of the terminals, make it impossible for you to get on or off the ship, or for your trip to be conducted in a safe and feasible way.

Things to consider

Ships have some specific safety considerations. For example, some routine items of medical or heavy mobility equipment may not be allowed on board or permitted in all parts of the ship. For cruises or longer journeys, not all cabins are designed for wheelchair users, which may impose a practical limit on the number of wheelchair users who can be carried on the ship, and on the choice of accommodation available. If such a limit is reached, operators are within their rights to refuse bookings for accessible cabins. Information on any restrictions will be available from your operator.

If you need assistance, you should tell the cruise operator at least 48 hours in advance, although, if you give the operator less than 48 hours’ notice, they must still make reasonable efforts to help. If you need help, agree a designated point and time to meet the assistant.

Assistance in port

If you have requested assistance in advance, the operator of the port terminal will check in and register your luggage and any mobility equipment. They will help you with security checks and border controls, and will assist you on to the ship. You should expect similar help at the end of the voyage if the ship docks in an EU member state.

It is important to note, however, that if you arrive at the port with medical or mobility equipment, but you have not given prior warning, then you may not be allowed to take it onto the ship. Similarly, if you have not informed your travel agent or tour operator of your disability in advance, the operator may refuse to check you in.
Assistance on board

Tour operators must carry any medical or mobility equipment you need that is reasonably necessary for your trip. This is subject to the safety requirements mentioned above, and there is no charge for this.

If you’ve requested such assistance, the operator of the ferry or cruise ship will help you to board, to get to a seating area or cabin, and to stow any luggage. If you have an electric wheelchair, which is too large or too heavy for some areas of a ship – so that it has to remain on the car deck of a ferry, for example – you will be provided with alternative equipment for use during your trip.

On request, a member of the cruise or ferry operator will help you proceed to the toilet. If you have a companion, they will need to help you with this or other aspects of personal care.

At the end of your trip, on request, the cruise or ferry operator will retrieve your luggage and help you disembark.

Train travel

If you are travelling from the UK on the Eurostar, a range of support options are available to assist with anything from carrying your luggage, to station parking, to wheelchair access.

Although Eurostar has a ‘turn up and go’ assistance service, it is advisable to contact them well in advance of your travel to discuss your travel needs. On the day of travel you will need to arrive 75 minutes before your scheduled departure time and make your way to their assistance welcome point.

Wheelchairs are allowed on the Eurostar trains, and any companion travelling with you for assistance may travel at a reduced rate.

Eurostar passengers are also entitled to a reduced rate for a special luggage door-to-door delivery service from First Luggage (tel: 0800 083 5503; euroluggagedelivery.com).

Other train service providers abroad will have their own requirements and restrictions. Try to organise travel ahead of your trip and to contact travel providers in advance. Most will operate telephone helplines accessible from the UK with assistants who speak English.
Driving abroad

If you have a Blue Badge, it is possible that you may be able to use this in other European countries to receive the same access and parking concessions as in the UK. Different countries have different rules for the use of blue badges, and it is not universally recognised, so always research your destination in advance.

Before arranging any car hire abroad, consider whether you will be able to manage a left-hand drive car.

General self-management

Luggage

Some forms of arthritis can make it very difficult to carry anything, let alone heavy travel luggage. Try to plan carefully how much luggage you really need to take with you when you travel, and work out in advance how you are going to transport it.

Starting out with a lightweight suitcase or bag can significantly reduce the overall weight of your packed luggage. Many suitcases and holdalls are now available that are of an extremely lightweight construction and have built-in wheels. Those with four wheels can be particularly easy to push or pull.

Do take advantage of assistance available at any port, airport or station help point. Don’t be afraid to ask for help carrying or lifting bags, for example from a taxi driver or a fellow traveller.

Always check your airline or tour operator’s baggage allowance limitations and available assistance facilities.

Avoiding jet lag

For many people with arthritis, maintaining a regular sleep pattern is an essential part of the daily management of the condition and pain control. Be aware that jet lag can significantly disrupt a normal sleep pattern. Different people react differently to jet lag, and its severity can be affected by how far you travel (generally, the more time zones you cross, the more significant the effect will be), but the most common effects include drowsiness or lethargy in daytime, sleep disturbance at night, and sometimes disturbance to appetite or digestion.

Speak to your doctor before you travel about any adjustments you may need to make to when you take your medication if you are crossing time lines, and about any possible jet lag remedies.
Sun protection

Everyone should protect against sunburn by avoiding exposure to the sun, particularly when it is at its strongest, and by wearing protection. Some arthritis medications can make skin particularly sensitive to the sun, so always use a sunscreen with a high sun protection factor (SPF) of at least factor 15.

Also, if you’ve received steroid injections, these can cause changes to the skin at the injection site, meaning that the skin can burn more easily, so use a higher factor sunscreen to protect those areas.

Diet

An important part of managing the symptoms of arthritis lies in maintaining a healthy diet. When travelling, this can sometimes be difficult, as you may find you are necessarily having unfamiliar foods or drinks, and you may struggle to stick to an established dietary pattern.

It is a good idea always to avoid dehydrating food or drink (for example, salty foods or alcohol) before travel, particularly on airlines. Always try to take fresh drinking water with you. Note that regulations at airports will require you to discard any bottled water as you proceed through security, but you can still purchase drinks before boarding flights. Having a ready supply of drinking water can significantly help reduce the dehydrating effects of jet lag, which can make fatigue worse.

Exercise

Exercise plays an important role in easing the stiffness that is a common symptom of arthritis, but keeping joints moving can be difficult while travelling. Any form of travel – and flights in particular – can encourage sitting for long periods of time in one position and this can make your joints stiff. Try to get up and walk around if possible. If you can’t get out of your seat for any reason, try to do some simple sitting down exercises regularly, such as leg circles or leg lifts. Learning some basic relaxation and mindfulness techniques can also be helpful.
How Arthritis Care can help you

Want to talk to someone about your arthritis?
Or read more about the condition?

Call our free, confidential Helpline on 0808 800 4050 for information and support. We’re open weekdays from 09:30 to 17:00 – we’d really like to hear from you.

We have over 40 free booklets and factsheets on various aspects of arthritis, from diet and surgery, to managing pain and fatigue. These can be sent to you in the post – just ask our Helpline staff for details.

Go online
You can download all our booklets and factsheets as PDFs from arthritiscare.org.uk/information
We also have an Online Community, where you can chat to others with arthritis, and can be reached at arthritiscareforum.org.uk

—

Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK have joined together to help more people live well with arthritis. Read how at arthritisresearchuk.org/merger. All donations will now go to Arthritis Research UK and be used to help people with arthritis live full and active lives in communities across England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.
Registered Charity Number 207711, SC041156.

—

Thank you

—

Note: This information sheet may be photocopied and distributed freely on the condition that it is reproduced in its entirety and that it is not quoted without acknowledgement.