
Dakota Diabetes Coalition is proud to offer this column on diabetes and related concerns every other Friday.



Dr. Johnson is a family practice doctor in Grand Forks with a special interest in diabetes -- and a special knack for writing. As a member of the Dakota Diabetes Coalition, he has generously made himself available to answer questions through our listserv. If you have comments, or questions for Dr. Johnson to address in future columns, please contact gailhand@q.com



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A Diabetes Travel Journal

On the road, with extra meds, supplies, snacks

This week, a more personal perspective of diabetes. One can find great resources for travel, including the American Diabetes Association website www.diabetes.org, but a recent trip to Chicago for a couple of Cubs games and a concert reminded me of how many little things I do automatically when I travel to keep me out of trouble with diabetes on the road.

First, preparation

Before I travel, I need to make sure that I have plenty of supplies. I always bring what I need plus 3 extra days, just in case. Plan your diabetes for travel as if things **won't** go smoothly, that's a strategy that can't really miss. For me, this means keeping handy **all of my medications, plus pump supplies, sensor supplies, and insulin.**

I pack insulin bottles in two different places, but always in bags that will be with me, my backpack and computer bag. Put your insulin where it will avoid temperature extremes. Don't put anything you'll need in a checked bag -- it may not go to the same destination as you. Even though I am on a pump for insulin, I always **bring syringes in the rare event of a pump failure**. No matter what the situation, I can always take an injection.

Lots of strips are important, as **testing more often on vacation** rather than less often usually makes for a less stressful vacation.

Plan your travel so you have enough time to make connecting flights at airports. It's no fun having a hypoglycemic episode at the opposite end of a terminal with only 10 minutes to spare. I bring lots of portable snacks like granola bars, glucose tabs and candy. I keep them in every bag, not just one place.

Patients often ask, "How do I get enough medication if I'm near the end of my prescriptions, or if they will run out when I'm gone?" This is usually a simple fix. Many insurance plans offer a "**vacation override**" to get extra medication, so ask your pharmacist. This trip had both car travel and air travel, as I needed to go to Omaha for a family function first. In the car, sitting for hours at a time, I always need extra insulin, so I'm not afraid to dose for that. I have more energy if I do this, rather than "just letting it go and dealing with it later."

Car travel generally allows for a lot more control over a situation than does air travel, so plan some stops. When I drive to Omaha, I plan a stop at Sioux Falls, which has a large mall right off the interstate where I can walk and get something to eat or drink. This is an example of just **building health breaks** into a trip.

Airports, personnel and air travel

Insulin will need to go in the quart-size clear zip lock bag with other liquids in your carry-on bag. Clearly identify your diabetes supplies to the security personnel. I've never had any trouble at the airport when I've done this, and I've never encountered an officer who didn't know what an insulin pump was. It's a myth that you need a note from your doctor to get these items through security. It doesn't hurt to have one, but federal law protects you and your medical supplies. In the rare event that you encounter a security officer who is unfamiliar with this, or unwilling to let you and your supplies through, ask to talk to the

FAA or TSA supervisor on duty. Don't be afraid to ask for help -- airports and airlines generally want to give you good service, but you sometimes need to ask.

What about food?

- 1) My rule of thumb is to **never count on food being available** when I may need it. Always, always, always have something with you. Airports are variable in what may be available, and if your plane is delayed restaurants may not be open. So, always carry food with you as if you will be on your own.
- 2) Ballparks and concert auditoriums are pretty variable too. I've always been able to bring in **small packs of glucose** tabs or candy if I explain why at the gate in a non-threatening manner. Again, they want to give you good service, and they usually understand the situation. Always **use the "purse/bag check"** line. It's no fun to get to the front of a line --just to be sent back to have everything I'm carrying checked out by security. **Cargo pants or a fanny pack** is perfect for the concert, ballpark, exploring the city, or whatever activity.
- 3) Food choices on vacation can be tough. If a good choice is available, I'll generally take it. But if I am going to a 5-star restaurant once a year, I probably won't make good choices. Here's where **portion control** really matters. I don't have to eat everything I'm served in its entirety, but I can try lots of good things. Many hotels have mini-bars or mini-refrigerators in the room. Ask ahead about this when you make reservations. Often places that do not have them will bring in a small fridge to accommodate you. That way I can take food back to the room and savor my 5-star treats later, when it won't hurt my blood sugar.

Find out **where the nearest pharmacy is** located. Ask people at the hotel, or find out on your own. I always do this when I'm on the road. When I've needed them, I've generally found pharmacy personnel very helpful. They can **call your home pharmacy to confirm an active prescription** if you need a refill or replacement. Know your **physician's and pharmacy's phone numbers**. If you don't have them, that's OK, the pharmacy will be able to figure it out, but it slows you down. If you use a large pharmacy chain, such as CVS, Walgreen's, Wal-Mart, etc., all of their affiliates are on the same computer systems. They can look up your prescriptions on the spot.

I find that vacations often give me a **good opportunity to walk**, and Chicago this time was no exception. Most of the good shopping and restaurants were within walking distance of our hotel, although this may be more than a mile. Sometimes, I'm more active than I am at home! **Drinking water is important**, and bottled water is everywhere. Hot windy ballgames or hot sweaty concerts always dry me out, and blood sugar may be easier to control if you're hydrated. Major league ballparks and large concert facilities always have paramedics or other medical personnel, so if you need assistance, facility personnel can summon them. I even found out once that there is a medical tent at the Renaissance Festival in Minneapolis (that's another story).

I try to know **where I might get medical care** if necessary. A large name medical center or university hospital/clinic is usually a good choice, but most hotels can assist in finding services. This time in Chicago, I knew my hotel was close to Northwestern University medical center. As it turned out, it was right across the street, and even better, I never needed to go there!

This is by no means a complete list for travel with diabetes, but just some tips I've learned over the years. I've made these approaches so routine that when I'm on the road diabetes is at most a minor nuisance, one reason I really enjoy traveling.

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