

Medical Travel, Travel Medicine: What's the Difference?

You can understand the confusion. Similar name, different medical specialty. 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 health care 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, focuses on preventing the spread of infectious diseases by travellers. This multi-disciplinary field includes preventive medicine, emergency care, immunology, epidemiology, mental health, gastroenterology, and dermatology. A travel health practitioner is also knowledgeable of world geography, the health system and the socio-cultural customs of the traveller's destination.



The three components of travel medicine are: The individual traveller (age, past and current health status, underlying chronic health conditions, budget for medications and vaccinations); the risks (visits to rural or remote areas, type of travel - business, adventure, leisure, long-term working assignment, epidemics and general health of the population of the destination country); and the intervention (vaccination and medication recommendations, general health advice, including food and water safety, and insect-bite prevention methods).

It's not only diseases such as malaria, yellow fever, or dengue fever that are of concern. Mental health, traveller's diarrhea, poor air quality, heat stroke, trauma due to traffic accidents, and prescription refills are all in the purview of travel medicine. According to GeoSentinel's 2009 study of long-term travellers to developing countries 50 percent get sick and 8 percent need to see a physician. Depending on a person's health and risk factors at the destination, it is not uncommon for travel health practitioners to advise travellers to postpone a trip, change the itinerary, or not travel at all.

When it comes to medical travel, researching the facility's accreditation and the medical provider's qualifications for the procedure, access to post-surgery care and follow-up if complications arise back home are key issues when choosing treatment abroad. In this growing sector 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 patients continue to incur out-of-pocket expenses for their procedures.



Medical tourism and travel medicine intersect 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, Costa Rica, 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 local area 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 health care system. Being a responsible traveller means being well prepared, weighing the risks involved, and leaving the smallest footprint behind.

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IAMAT (International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers) is a non-profit organization dedicated to travel health and coordinates an international network of doctors dedicated to treating sick travellers.

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