

Report from an NGO: The unexpected challenges of travelling internationally with prescription medication

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Introduction

IAMAT (International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to travel health. Travellers rely on IAMAT for advice about health risks at their destination and to locate medical care abroad. Over the years, we have noted a common and long-standing concern among travellers: how to travel internationally with prescription medication. Laws for importing prescription medication are country-specific and the clarity and accessibility of these regulations can vary widely. There can be contradictory information from consular sources and regulatory organisations, as well as inconsistent enforcement at the border.

In this report, we present a case study that outlines a traveller's experience of importing prescription medication for personal use into Japan for 70 days. We discuss basic guidelines and regulations regarding medication importation and relevant risks such as purchasing medication abroad and falsified medical products. The intent of this report is to demonstrate the challenges patients face when travelling with medication and highlight the ways practitioners can support patients through their practice.

About IAMAT

Since its founding in 1960, IAMAT's mission has been to coordinate medical services for travellers and help prepare them for health risks abroad. IAMAT provides up-to-date health information for all countries and access to an international Medical Directory of qualified English-speaking doctors. As a partner of the Fight the Fakes campaign, IAMAT educates travellers about the risks of substandard and falsified medical products abroad. We also support travel medicine education for practitioners through the IAMAT Scholarship Fund. This program enables healthcare practitioners from countries where travel medicine is an emerging specialty to study and train abroad.

Travelling with prescription medication

Helping travellers prepare for a healthy trip is central to IAMAT's work. In addition to questions about vaccinations and malaria prophylaxis, we frequently receive questions about travelling with medication and how to find medication abroad. Our online resources on travelling with medication are consistently among the most viewed pages on our website and we often receive emails and phone calls from travellers looking for advice. In response to one article on our blog about travelling with medication,

dozens of individuals contacted us requesting personalised advice.

Travellers are often unaware of restrictions on importing medication, unsure of where to find reliable information about restrictions, or unclear on how to navigate import requirements for their destination. In some cases, they may not be aware that their medication is regulated (e.g. they are unaware that their medication is a narcotic or psychotropic). This causes significant stress for travellers, particularly those who enquire in the few days before their departure – or in some cases, mid-trip. Common enquiries IAMAT receives regarding travelling with prescription medication are listed in Table 1.

- The availability of specific medication (e.g. hypertension, anxiety) in other countries
- When to take medication and insulin across time zones
- Travelling with psychotropic medication for treatment of epilepsy or mental health conditions
- Travelling with narcotics for pain management
- Long-term travel with medication (e.g. packing and storing insulin)
- How students can find a reliable supply of medication during an international exchange
- Whether medication can be sent through the post or by courier to a person who is abroad
- Whether a traveller can carry someone else's prescription medication across borders (e.g. when visiting someone who is living abroad or travelling long-term/nomadically)

Table 1
Common inquiries

IAMAT provides guidance to travellers, offers information about guidelines and international regulations, helps travellers understand and navigate regulations, and connects travellers with reliable doctors at their destination in case a prescription refill is required.

To demonstrate the difficulty some travellers face when travelling with prescription medication and how they can be supported, we present the following case study:

Case Study

A traveller's perspective: the challenges of travelling with prescription medication

In spring 2017, an American traveller and IAMAT member contacted us for assistance. He was taking multiple prescription medications (two hypertension

Report from an NGO *continued*

medications, a statin, alpha blocker, nitroglycerin, and a NSAID) and was travelling to Japan for 70 days. Twenty-five days before departure, the traveller learned from a guidebook that Japan restricts importation of more than a 30-day supply of prescription medication¹. The complexity of import regulations and contradictory sources of information caused the traveller to feel confused and anxious. He contacted IAMAT with the following questions:

- a) Can I legally travel to Japan with my prescription medication?
- b) If my medication is confiscated at customs, how can I obtain a refill at my destination?
- c) Will I need an import certificate for the amount of medication required for the duration of my trip? If so, how do I apply for one?

Regulations for importing prescription medication vary across countries, but Japan places more restrictions than most by also regulating the import of non-psychoactive and non-narcotic medication. To determine if the traveller would be impacted by Japanese regulations, we directed him to his nearest Japanese consulate in the United States, where consular staff would be able to provide specific information about the regulations affecting his medications. We also provided the traveller with links to information about bringing medication for personal use into Japan. Based on the amount of medication required for a 70-day trip, we determined that the traveller must obtain a Yakkan Shoumei import certificate before departure. After identifying the required documentation and the process for applying for the import certificate, we communicated this to the traveller by phone and email.

It can take two weeks or longer to receive an original Yakkan Shoumei by mail.² A copy of the Yakkan Shoumei can be obtained by email or fax in approximately one week and is acceptable at customs.² The application must be sent to Japan, approved, and then returned to the traveller, but delays can occur if additional information is required. In the event that the import certificate would not be received in time, we advised the traveller to contact an IAMAT-affiliated doctor in Japan to ensure that his medications were available and that he would be able to obtain a prescription upon arrival if necessary. The traveller was also advised that he could travel with a 30-day supply without an import certificate and purchase medication for the remainder of the trip in Japan. At the traveller's request, we contacted an IAMAT-affiliated clinic in Japan to confirm that the medications were available and the approximate cost in US dollars.

The traveller successfully applied for an import certificate with the assistance of staff at the Japanese consulate in the United States. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan confirmed receipt of the application by email and requested additional documentation. In addition to the Yakkan Shoumei application forms, the traveller was asked to submit supporting documentation from his healthcare practitioner outlining his medical condition and a complete list of medications, dosages, and the number of tablets in each prescription. The traveller provided this information via email and received an electronic copy of the import certificate the following week. After his trip, the traveller reported to IAMAT that he did not experience any issues at customs and did not declare the medication, despite going to great lengths to obtain the import certificate.

Supporting patients: what travellers need to know

Ascertaining country-specific requirements for prescription medication can be challenging, but practitioners can support their patients by providing them with the information they need to travel successfully. Below, we discuss key points patients travelling with medication should know:

1. The traveller's prescription medication may be regulated at their destination

The enforcement of regulations regarding prescription importation can vary according to the substance being imported, the amount being imported, and country-specific regulations.

Medications that target the central nervous system, including narcotics and psychotropics, are controlled substances and their importation is highly regulated around the world.

Many countries, including the United Kingdom, require travellers to present a special permit or certificate to take a certain amount (typically more than a 30-day supply) of prescribed narcotic out of the country. Countries may also require incoming travellers to present a permit or license for import to bring their controlled medication into the country.

For substances that are not regulated, no more than a 90-day supply is typically recommended.³ However, substances that are legal or available over-the-counter in one country may be illegal or require a prescription for importation in others. Japan is one country that restricts some non-regulated medication. For example, the governments of the United States and United Kingdom advise their citizens that it is illegal to import certain medications that contain stimulants

into Japan. This includes common decongestant medications that are available over the counter in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed), as well as prescription medications containing amphetamines (Adderall).^{4,5}

To check country-specific regulations, travellers can check the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) website.⁶ The INCB is an independent and quasi-judicial organisation responsible for monitoring compliance with international drug control. The INCB website details country-specific restrictions for the import of narcotic and psychotropic substances. Countries are required to submit their individual requirements and restrictions, but descriptions can be incomplete, vague, out of date, not in the traveller's language, or written in highly technical and unclear language. To supplement the INCB and for other prescription medication requirements, travellers may contact their destination's embassy, consulate, and ministry of health, although these sources may also be incomplete or inconsistent.

2. Travellers should bring a prescription and letter from their healthcare practitioner

Travellers carrying prescription medication abroad should contact their healthcare practitioner several weeks prior to departure to obtain a copy of their prescription and a letter that details their health condition and treatment plan. This can help facilitate border crossings and consultation with a healthcare practitioner at their destination if needed. Some countries require a prescription or a letter from a healthcare practitioner for travellers carrying narcotic or psychotropic substances. The letter should contain the following details:

- The patient's name (the same as written on their passport).
- The name of their primary healthcare practitioner or specialist.
- A list of medical supplies and equipment.
- A list of all medications and their dosage. Include both the generic and brand names, as brand names may differ in other countries.

Travellers should ensure that they have enough medication to last the duration of their trip, as well as an extra supply in case of an emergency such as theft, lost medication, or a delay in return travel. Practitioners or pharmacists may have to liaise with the patient's insurance company if there are restrictions on the amount of medication allowed to be dispensed.

3. There are risks to purchasing medication abroad

Travellers may consider purchasing medication or vaccinations abroad when cost is a factor (e.g. the high cost of atovaquone proguanil (Malarone) or Japanese Encephalitis vaccination) or if they need to re-supply during a long trip (e.g. insulin, contraceptives, blood pressure medication). In some cases, travellers whose prescription medication is restricted upon entry may see purchasing medication at their destination as their only option. However, travellers are often unaware of the challenges of refilling a prescription or potential risks of purchasing medication abroad.

Medication prescribed in another country may have a different brand name, but have the same active ingredients. However, the strength of active ingredients can also differ. For some types of medications (e.g. cardiovascular, antiepileptic, and respiratory medications) different formulas may cause noticeable changes for some individuals.⁷ The dosage of medication dispensed to the patient may also differ.

Pharmacists in some countries may not honour a prescription written by a healthcare practitioner from another country or in a language they are not familiar with. Before departure, patients should contact a healthcare practitioner in their destination country who speaks their language, ensure that their medication is available, and that a prescription can be provided if needed.

If travellers do purchase medication abroad, they should only do so from a licensed and reputable pharmacist (e.g. a university hospital practitioner). Travellers should be advised never to purchase medication from an unlicensed vendor, street market, or online due to the risk of substandard and falsified medication. Falsified medication can be found around the world and can cause serious harm. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently examined the prevalence of falsified medication and found that 1 in 10 medical products in low- and middle-income countries are either substandard or falsified.⁸ Reports to the WHO indicate that antibiotics and antimalarial medication are the most common falsified products.⁹

These products contain the incorrect amount of active ingredient, no active ingredient, or toxic substances that can cause negative and potentially fatal effects. Falsified medication and its packaging can look very similar to legitimate medication, effectively deceiving travellers and pharmacists who may be unknowingly distributing them.

Report from an NGO *continued*

Advising the traveller

For patients seeking counselling on how to safely travel with their prescription medication, a list of recommendations is available in Table 2

DO	DON'T
• Check the legality of travelling with your medication. Countries place restrictions on certain types of medications (e.g. psychotropic and narcotic drugs) and the quantity of medication (e.g. over a 30-day supply) • Keep medications in their original labelled packages • Divide medication between carry-on and check-in luggage in case your bags are lost or stolen • Bring a letter from your healthcare practitioner and a prescription in case you need to resupply at your destination • Learn about how to store your medication during transit (e.g. if changes in temperature influence the effectiveness of your medication, do not store it in the luggage hold) • Pack enough medication for the duration of your trip, plus an extra supply • Check that your medication is available at your destination in case you need to refill your prescription • Declare your medication when passing through customs • At your destination, establish a routine and take your medication consistently	• Decant medication into unlabelled containers • Mail medication internationally • Travel with medication that is not prescribed for your personal use, even if it is for a family member • Stop or change the amount of medication you take when you travel unless otherwise instructed by your healthcare practitioner • Purchase medication from an unlicensed pharmacy, street vendor, or online • Assume that medications are the same around the world. Always make sure that you are taking the right medication in the correct dosage • Expose certain medication to temperature extremes. Ask your pharmacist for advice if your medication is affected by extreme hot/cold

Table 2

Travelling with prescription medication: advice for travellers

Conclusion

Travellers can face a number of daunting issues when travelling internationally with prescription medication. The complexity of regulations and conflicting sources of information from travel websites, consulates, embassies, and regulatory agencies can cause confusion. As demonstrated by the case study, some countries impose more rigorous restrictions than others and travellers may have to unexpectedly navigate foreign legal requirements. IAMAT helps travellers find and navigate information to safely and legally travel with their medication. However, further work needs to be done to bring awareness to the issues around travelling with prescription medication. Travellers need access to more country-specific and reliable resources on regulations, guidance on how to

travel with medication, and how to safely access medication abroad. Governments must provide international regulatory agencies with clear, up-to-date requirements and apply them consistently at border crossings. Airlines, tour companies, and travel agents can play a supportive role in alerting travellers to restrictions for their destination. In sum, a concerted effort among primary care providers, travel medicine specialists, regulatory agencies, and the travel industry to better inform travellers about travelling with prescription medication would improve the experience of travellers, minimise unnecessary anxiety, and reduce travellers' chances of encountering fake medications abroad.

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