



# GROWN UP CONGENITAL HEART PATIENTS ASSOCIATION



## Travel Information

## **This leaflet gives information on travelling for adults who were born with a heart condition (congenital heart condition)**

**Having a congenital heart condition doesn't mean you can't travel but it may require a bit of advance planning. It is a good idea to talk to your GUCH specialist nurse or GUCH cardiologist about your travel plans.**

### **Your destination**

To get the most from any holiday or travelling you should plan ahead and think if your chosen destination is going to present any challenges to your heart condition.

This might be simply checking that your holiday isn't somewhere too hilly for your level of fitness.

Visiting somewhere at high altitude might also be a challenge. For certain types of heart disease being far above sea level might lead to increased breathlessness and low oxygen levels. Altitude sickness can also be potentially dangerous.

If you are prone to sudden changes in your health for example palpitations needing emergency treatment then you should think about how near you will be to good medical care. Developing a palpitation when in a remote place may be an additional risk.

Extremes of weather also need to be considered. If you are taking lots of medication to regulate your heart then sitting in very hot sunshine might lead to dehydration and low blood pressure.

The usual precautions regarding eating safe food, drinking safe water and updating vaccinations apply to all travellers.

### **Travelling by Car**

A Blue Badge (formerly Orange) is a parking concession for people with severe walking difficulties. It can be obtained from your local authority. Blue Badges are valid in Europe and most of the world, but do check before travelling.

### **Travelling with Medicines**

For longer trips your doctor can give you up to three month's worth of medicine.

**It can be helpful to carry a letter from your doctor with you describing the medicines you need to take. Check the rules of**

**the country you are travelling too. Some countries have very strict rules about the types of drugs you can travel with.**

To find out more about the country that you are travelling to, check out the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk). They have a box on the front page entitled 'travelling and living abroad' inside this is a section on travel advice by country.

## Oxygen Supplies

The NHS uses four companies to supply oxygen and this can be delivered anywhere in the UK. You will need to ask a doctor a couple of weeks before you trip to arrange this. If you are travelling outside the UK (including cruises) the NHS will not provide oxygen. The NHS does not own the equipment so you should ask the supplier for their permission to take it abroad. They will also help you to obtain oxygen supplies while you are abroad.

If you are travelling by train, ship, coach or aircraft you must ask permission to take your oxygen. There may be restrictions on the size of cylinder you can take.

### Oxygen suppliers are:

Vitalair (BOC Medical)	0800 136 603	<a href="http://www.vitalair.co.uk">www.vitalair.co.uk</a>
Air Products	0800 373 580	<a href="http://www.airproducts.co.uk">www.airproducts.co.uk</a>
Allied Oxycare	0500 823773	
Air Liquide (was Linde)	0808 2020 999	<a href="http://www.airliquide.com">www.airliquide.com</a>

## GUCH Patient Passport

Should you need any medical advice while you are away, carrying a Patient Passport would enable a medical professional to know what your diagnosis is and provide them with the contact details for your GUCH hospital. These Patient Passports are produced by GUCHPA and can be obtained from your GUCH hospital. GUCHPA will send one to you if you need one and you can then ask for it to be completed at your hospital.

## Air Travel

If you have a pacemaker the metal may set off the alarm in the security arch. It is also possible, but very unlikely, that the magnetic field in the arch might affect it. It is therefore usual for people with pacemakers to avoid going through these and have a hand search instead. It is also better if hand-held security wands are not used directly over the place where a pacemaker is fitted. Carry the card/registration form and show it to the security staff. In foreign countries the message can most easily be communicated by tapping your heart with your hand as you say the word "pacemaker"!

Airports are big places and it is very usual to have to walk long distances to get to and from the airplane. It is much better to

make sure you get there with plenty of time so you don't have to rush. If walking is a particular difficulty it would be better to inform your travel agent and airline in advance. At the airport there is usually assistance available in the form of wheelchairs and/or electric vehicles.

The air on board an aeroplane is dry so you can easily become dehydrated. Try to avoid alcohol and caffeinated drinks and drink plenty of water.

During a flight the oxygen level in the airplane cabin is lower than normal. If your oxygen level is already low this can lead to a feeling of increased breathlessness. If you have low oxygen levels then your doctor may arrange a "Fitness to Fly" test before you travel. If you need to have oxygen during a flight this needs to be pre-arranged. You might not be able to take your own oxygen with you. You will need to tell the airline how much oxygen you need and for how long. They are likely to charge you a fee for this service. The Pulmonary Hypertension Association web-site has a useful list of airlines and their oxygen policies ([www.phassociation.uk.com](http://www.phassociation.uk.com)).

Some people with heart problems will be at risk of blood clots forming in their veins during a flight (deep venous thrombosis). This is especially true for long flights. Compression stockings, a high intake of fluid (non-alcoholic!) and regular exercises during the flight all help. Ask your doctor if you need additional prevention with any medication or injections.

## Taking Medicines on Airplanes

Always carry medicines in their original containers. Try to carry medicine in your hand luggage in case of lost baggage. It is also worth taking two sets and keeping them separate.

If you need to carry syringes (needles) make sure you have a letter from your doctor. Contact the airline to check they allow them on board.

In times of high security airports may only allow you to carry liquid or cream medicines which are essential for the duration of your journey. Remember to add a couple of hours extra in case of delays. Plan ahead.

If you are taking a Warfarin self-monitoring machine with you, it is important you keep the test strips with you in your hand luggage. The temperature in the hold of an aircraft is too low for them.

If your medicine needs to be refrigerated, make sure there is a fridge at your destination and use a cool bag for travelling.

Some medicines contain controlled drugs and are regulated under the Misuse of Drugs Act and there are limits on the amount you can take outside the UK. HM Revenue and Customs has a list of medicines that contain controlled drugs. Tel 0845 010 9000 or [www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)

It would be sensible to keep a copy of your prescription with your medicines in case of query.

## Travel Insurance

It is important to have travel insurance if you travel abroad so make sure you can get this before you book. Allow plenty of time to sort out travel insurance as it might take longer than usual if your insurer asks for further information about your heart condition. The GUCHPA helpline and web-site has advice over where you might find suitable insurance. It is worth shopping around for the best deal.

## European Health Insurance Card

This covers necessary healthcare when you visit a European Union country plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. To obtain one call 0845 606 2030 (you will need your NHS number or National Insurance Number). More information can also be found at [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

## GUCH PA. (learning from other patients and sharing your experiences)

It is often possible to learn from the experiences of other patients. GUCH PA has a message board on their website [www.guch.org.uk](http://www.guch.org.uk). You can use this to find out if other patients have been to your holiday destination and any travel tips or suggestions they may have. Likewise, don't hesitate to share your own views on where you have been. Let other patients know if it takes much longer than anticipated to get from the check in area to boarding or if you found the city you visited hillier than expected.

Remember too that GUCH PA needs your feedback let them know if you hit major problems. The organisation can then build an overall picture of what barriers there are and in the long term will be better able to campaign and effect changes on behalf of all patients. Write to the office address, telephone (01473 252007) or e-mail [admin@guch.org.uk](mailto:admin@guch.org.uk)

**In summary travelling with even complicated heart disease is possible. Planning well in advance is the key to a successful trip. Your GUCH nurse and doctor will do everything they can to support your travel plans. However it is important you contact them early to make any special arrangements.**

## Contact

Saracen's House, 25 St. Margaret's Green,  
Ipswich, Suffolk IP4 2BN

Telephone 01473 252007

Fax 01473 281823

Helpline 0800 854759

[www.guch.org.uk](http://www.guch.org.uk)



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[www.guch.org.uk](http://www.guch.org.uk)

email: [info@guch.org.uk](mailto:info@guch.org.uk)

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