

Substance Use



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No prior history?

Substance misuse is a mental health concern. Drug and alcohol use amplifies mental health problems by mimicking or hiding them, and makes medication less effective.

Signs of substance dependence:

- experiencing cravings or strong compulsions to ingest the substance
- difficulty controlling intake
- suffering physical withdrawal when use has been reduced or stopped
- need to increase the amount over time
- consuming an inordinate amount of time and energy to access the substance
- continuing to take the substance despite its harmful effects

Travellers may turn to alcohol, cannabis, hallucinogens, amphetamines (stimulants), benzodiazepines (tranquilizers), and inhalants to reduce stress or escape feelings of isolation. For others, being free of the social rules governing behaviour back home is a chance to ‘let loose’ or experiment with substances not easily available in their own country.

Substance use and misuse

Substance abuse is the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances such as alcohol and drugs. It can cause an individual to need drugs to function properly (psychological dependence) or need more drugs to get the same effect (physical dependence). This causes a strong desire to use the substance and difficulty controlling its use.

Risk to travellers

Travel does not cause substance dependence, although it may provide an opportunity to misuse psychoactive substances or cause a relapse in addiction survivors. Lack of familiar support networks, language barriers, and cultural perceptions toward substance use can make it difficult to seek appropriate medical attention. In addition to managing travel stress, recognizing the warning signs of substance abuse and/or dependence and how to get help abroad are key to a safe trip.

Using mood altering substances risks placing you in unwanted or dangerous situations. Loss of control, disorientation, psychiatric disassociation, psychosis, or withdrawal (insomnia, tremors, anxiety, agitation, hallucinations, delusion, delirium tremens, seizures, hyperactivity) in an unfamiliar environment increases stress levels and could result in a medical emergency or arrest. Given the uncertainties of travel and the potentially severe legal consequences in many countries, experimentation with new substances is not recommended while travelling abroad.

Also take into account how the host culture perceives substance use and persons with substance addiction. Negative attitudes can make it more difficult to get proper treatment.



Photo by Negative Space, Pexels.

If you are going to seek a prohibited substance abroad, be aware that the purchase and use of some psychoactive drugs is illegal in the majority of countries and can lead to criminal charges, fines, imprisonment, or the death penalty (ie: Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey). Also, the quality of the product may be different than you may be used to back home. Know where to get clean injecting equipment, get educated on the risk of accidental overdose, and always practice safe sex.

I have a substance dependence

You can travel safely if you are actively managing and controlling your substance addiction. Know how unfamiliar environments, language barriers, and difficulty understanding social mores can increase stress levels. Recognizing warning signs that may lead to substance use can help you seek support or medical care in a timely manner.

Keep in mind that countries restrict the use or import of substances that alleviate withdrawal symptoms, such as methadone or buprenorphine. Check the [International Narcotics Control Board](#) for country restrictions, although the list is incomplete. You can also check your destination's embassy, consulate, and ministry of health websites for further information.

A note to family and friends

If you are accompanying a traveller with a mental illness, don't forget about your own health. Know how to recognize signs of psychological stress and avoid being isolated. You may want to hire a professional companion traveller to help during all or part of the trip. An internet search for 'professional travel companions' will bring up local and international organizations specializing in this service.

Treatment abroad usually involves hospitalization to stabilize symptoms of intoxication or withdrawal, with possible evacuation. Once you return home, visit your doctor to continue treatment which may include addiction counselling, psychotherapy, peer support, and medication.

Travel and mental health checklist

Before you leave

- Consult your healthcare practitioner to discuss if the type of travel you are planning is right for you. Get advice on how to stay healthy and cope with the effects of travel stress and jet lag. Ask if you can stay in touch with your healthcare provider during your trip.
- Find a reputable mental health professional at your destination who speaks your language. You may want to contact them prior to your trip to ensure continuity of care.
- Familiarize yourself with the psychiatric healthcare system of your destination country. Know what steps you need to take in case of an emergency.
- Book the most direct route possible to your destination; avoid layovers and long hours in transit.
- Travel with a trusted friend, family member, or professional travel companion. If you are travelling alone, set up regular check-in times to reach a family member or friend.
- Register with your embassy or consulate in case you need their assistance during an emergency abroad.

During your trip

- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive and go through security checks. Note that airports, train stations, and bus depots generally have medical facilities.
- Establish a routine that sets the tone for your trip. Familiarize yourself with your surroundings and if you can, integrate some activities that you are used to doing back home or bring you a sense of comfort.
- Bring a calming item (book, mobile device), memento, or journal that provides comfort during stressful situations.
- Know your mental and physical limits. Regularly reassess your original plans and change them to minimize stress levels.
- Know when to stop a challenging situation from escalating. Find non-confrontational solutions.
- Practice relaxing breathing exercises and integrate physical activity like walking, stretching or meditating to relieve stress. Get the appropriate amount of sleep, eat a healthy diet, and stay hydrated.

When you return

- Book an extra day or two off after you return to mentally and physically recover from your trip. This will help you adjust from jet lag and help you get back into your daily routine.
- Follow up with your healthcare practitioner if you needed emergency care abroad or to address any concerns you may have related to post-travel readjustment.

Are you travelling with, or suspect someone is experiencing an overdose or withdrawal?

- Remove self-harming objects such as knives, toxic chemicals, alcohol, and other psychoactive substances from reach.
- Seek help from a mental health professional that speaks your language.
- If the person is travelling alone and you know where they are staying, contact the accommodation to alert them of the situation. Ask the concierge to contact a mental health professional or ambulance. Also contact the traveller's embassy or consulate for emergency assistance.

Fake medications are found all over the world. These medications contain the wrong ingredient, the wrong amount of the active ingredient, no active ingredient, or toxic substances. Fake medications and packaging can look very similar to the real ones.

Buy medications before your trip and pack an extra supply in case they get lost or stolen. If you need to purchase medications abroad, locate a reputable doctor or pharmacist; university hospitals often have reliable mental health practitioners. Buy medications from a large pharmacy in a major city and do not purchase medications from street markets.

Know before you go

- Social and cultural acceptance of mental health in your destination country determines the type of care you will receive. Forced admission (where voluntary consent is not the norm), substandard psychiatric facilities (unhygienic conditions), questionable treatment (isolated confinement, lack of appropriate medicines), and difficulty finding mental healthcare professionals that speak your language should be taken into account when planning your trip.
- In some countries, disturbing the peace, uttering threats, or exhibiting strange behaviour can lead to arrest, criminal charges, imprisonment, or forced admission to a hospital or mental health facility.
- Be prepared to incur out-of-pocket medical expenses if you require psychiatric care abroad. Standard travel health insurance plans do not cover mental health conditions. Look for plans that cover psychiatric care – an independent broker can help.
- Get coverage from a company that specializes in emergency evacuation and repatriation. This service generally covers patients who have managed their illness and are being hospitalized abroad. Check the fine print for restrictions and exclusions. Last-minute evacuation insurance is extremely expensive (starting in the tens of thousands of dollars) and may be refused on the basis of the patient's mental health condition.

Health tips for your trip


- Avoid taking sleep medications during your flight as long periods of immobility can lead to the formation of blood clots.
- Do not drink alcohol if you are taking psychiatric medication.
- Establish a routine and continue taking your medication consistently. Do not stop or decrease the amount of medication you take unless instructed by your healthcare practitioner.
- If you require an emergency refill, show the attending physician the copy of your original prescription and letter from your doctor to facilitate the consultation. Be aware that some medications will not be available in your destination country or may not be available in the dosage that you require.

Travelling with medications

Consult your mental healthcare practitioner

- Find out which travel-related vaccinations and medications recommended for your trip may interfere with your current medication. You may need to seek alternative protection measures.
- Ask your healthcare practitioner how to adjust your medication dosage across different time zones.
- Get a copy of your prescription and a letter from your healthcare practitioner detailing your condition and treatment plan. This will facilitate border crossing and, should the need arise, during a medical consultation with a healthcare practitioner at your destination.
 - The letter should include the following details:
 - Your name (the same as on your passport).
 - Your healthcare practitioner's name.
 - A list of all medications and the dosage prescribed. Ensure that the generic and brand name (if applicable) are mentioned. Drug brand names may differ in other countries so providing the generic name will help the pharmacist or doctor abroad in case you need a refill.
 - A list of your medical supplies and equipment.
- Follow up with your healthcare practitioner if you needed a prescription refill abroad to ensure continuity of care back home.

How to pack your medication

- Pack all the medication you need for the duration of your trip, including an extra supply in case of an emergency. Medical standards and practices differ between countries and your medication may not be available at your destination.
- Keep all medications in their original packages or containers. Place medication packages in sealable plastic bags and breakable containers in bubble wrap.
- Divide tablet medications between your carry-on and checked luggage in case one of your bags is lost or stolen. Make sure the medication can be stored in the low temperatures of the luggage hold.
- Gels and liquid medication must be packed in your carry-on bag. Liquid medication can freeze at low temperatures in the luggage hold. If your medication requires refrigeration, use insulated wallets or containers during transit and make arrangements at your destination for safe storage.
- Don't send medication to your destination by post since it may get lost or stopped at customs. 

A note on psychotropic and narcotic medications

- In general, you can carry a 30-day supply of prescription medications for personal use. Medications that target the central nervous system (CNS) such as psychotropics and narcotics are controlled substances and their importation is highly regulated.
- If you need a supply of these medications for more than 30 days, a prescription or license for import may be required. Check the [International Narcotics Control Board \(INCB\) website](#) for information on country restrictions (although it is not a complete list). You can also check your destination's embassy, consulate, and ministry of health websites for further information. However, these sources may not always be helpful.

The Travel and Mental Health Series was reviewed by William W. Forgey, MD, Melvyn M. Nizny, MD, DLF, and David R. Shlim, MD.

We used many sources to write the series. Please contact us to get the complete list.