Foreign travel precautions – a guide for people with lymphoma

Having lymphoma or being on treatment for lymphoma does not mean that you can no longer travel abroad. However, you should discuss your plans with your medical team as early as possible. This is because people with lymphoma sometimes need to take special precautions, even after the treatment has finished.

In this information sheet we are focusing on the dangers of contracting an infectious disease abroad and are aiming to:

- give some general advice about how to lessen your chances of getting an infection while you are abroad
- look at which vaccines it would be safe for you to have if you have lymphoma
- advise you about the vaccines you might have to avoid
- briefly describe the most common vaccinations people require before they travel
- highlight precautions to take if you are travelling to malarial areas
- provide some useful sources of further information.

Protecting yourself against infections abroad

Travel from the UK to many worldwide destinations, for example Western Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and USA, does not require travellers to take any special precautions to safeguard their health. However, there are some destinations where travellers can encounter diseases that they are not immune to and which could be life-threatening.

General precautions to take

There are a number of things that anyone can do to protect themselves against getting an infection abroad and if you have lymphoma these are particularly important. For example, you can greatly reduce the risk of developing infectious disease abroad by:

- adhering carefully to basic personal hygiene measures such as scrupulous hand washing
- sterilising drinking water or buying drinking water in sealed bottles
- avoiding uncooked food such as salads and unpeeled fruit unless they have been thoroughly washed in sterilised or bottled water
- avoiding ice in your drinks if you are unsure of the water source
- choosing your accommodation carefully
- protecting yourself against mosquito bites using mosquito nets and insect repellants.
Vaccinations against infections abroad

All travellers are advised to check what infections they might expose themselves to at their destination. There are some vaccinations that people are advised to have before travelling to a number of countries worldwide. The exact vaccines recommended will depend on your destination. Your GP or travel clinic will be able to advise you on which ones are needed and we will also list a few useful sources of further information on page 5.

If you have lymphoma you can be more prone to certain infections because of the effect of the disease on your immune system. This is particularly true if you are currently receiving chemotherapy or steroids or are undergoing radiotherapy. People who have had their spleen removed are also at increased risk of some infections. All these treatments further suppress your immune system, reducing the protection your body normally gives you against infections you are exposed to, whether at home in the UK or abroad.

If you have lymphoma it is therefore particularly important that you have certain vaccinations before you travel. Your GP or travel clinic staff should be well aware of which vaccines are safe for people with lymphoma. However, it is a good idea to be well informed about this yourself and to bring it to the attention of the doctor or nurse when discussing their recommendations.

Getting advice at a travel clinic

Vaccinations in people with lymphoma

Vaccines that are safe if you have lymphoma

Many vaccines are both safe and advisable for people with lymphoma, even if you are still having treatment. Vaccines that are manufactured using killed bacteria or viruses or parts of these organisms should pose no problems. These ‘inactivated’ vaccines include vaccines against diphtheria, tetanus, polio (the injectable form of vaccine), meningitis (ACWY), influenza, pneumococcus, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, Japanese encephalitis, tick-borne encephalitis, typhoid (the injectable form of vaccine), cholera and rabies.
Vaccines that might not be safe if you have lymphoma

Some vaccines are not recommended for people with lymphoma – this is usually because the vaccine contains live organisms and these are known as ‘live’ vaccines. These live vaccines contain a small dose, considerably weakened, of a living organism. They work on the basis that, after vaccination, the organism multiplies in the body to a limited extent, not causing disease but causing a strong immune reaction. The vaccinated person is then protected against the disease caused by that organism in the future.

The following vaccines contain live organisms, so might not be safe:

- mumps, measles and rubella (MMR) vaccine
- oral polio vaccine
- oral typhoid vaccine
- yellow fever vaccine
- BCG vaccine (against tuberculosis).

In general, people with active lymphoma, people having chemotherapy, steroids or radiotherapy or people who have recently undergone bone marrow or stem cell transplantation should not receive these live vaccines. Your medical team will advise you on when it would be possible to have any vaccinations you need but the current Department of Health guidelines advise that you cannot have these vaccines for:

- at least 3 months after finishing a course of high-dose steroids
- at least 6 months after the end of chemotherapy or radiotherapy
- at least 12 months after finishing immunosuppressive therapy after a bone marrow transplant (or for even longer than this if you developed the complication of graft-versus-host disease).

This might mean that you cannot have a live vaccine at all before going abroad. You should be especially cautious about travelling to any area where there is a risk of contracting a disease which you cannot be vaccinated against. You would be strongly advised not to make such a trip.

Commonly recommended vaccines

**Tetanus and diphtheria vaccine:** A booster dose is recommended every 10 years and this is often given when foreign travel is planned. It is often given combined with the injectable polio vaccine.

**Polio vaccine:** A booster dose might be recommended before travel to certain destinations. Live and inactivated vaccines are available. The inactivated vaccine (the injectable form) is suitable for people with lymphoma.

**MMR (mumps, measles and rubella) vaccine:** This might be recommended for people who have not been vaccinated previously but it contains live organisms and so is often not suitable if you have lymphoma.

**Typhoid vaccine:** Recommended for travellers planning to spend time in areas where food and water can be contaminated (especially in the Indian subcontinent). An oral vaccine is
available as well as an injectable form. The oral form is a live vaccine, so is not recommended if you have lymphoma. The injectable form would be suitable.

**Hepatitis A vaccine:** Recommended for travellers to all areas except Western Europe, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and USA.

**Meningitis vaccines:** These vaccines help to prevent infection with some of the organisms that can cause meningitis. People who have had their spleen removed are at particular risk of contracting meningitis. This vaccine is recommended for travellers to sub-Saharan Africa, some parts of India and Nepal and for Saudi Arabia (it is essential for pilgrims going to Mecca for the Hajj or the Umrah).

**Rabies vaccine:** This might be recommended for travel involving contact with animals or travel to remote areas involving walking, running or cycling.

**Yellow fever vaccine:** The risk to the traveller of contracting yellow fever might be remote but vaccination against yellow fever is required for entry into some African, Asian and South American countries. If you have lymphoma you might not be able to have this live vaccine, and this could restrict your travel to these destinations.

**BCG:** The vaccine against tuberculosis might be recommended for travellers who have not previously received it where there is an intention to stay more than 4 weeks or in cases of close contact with the local population in Asia, Africa and Central and South America. It contains live organisms and is not recommended for people with lymphoma.

**Are travel vaccinations available on the NHS?**

The hepatitis A vaccine, the typhoid vaccine, the cholera vaccine and the combined diphtheria/tetanus/polio vaccine are available free of charge on the NHS from GP surgeries. These vaccinations can also be obtained from travel clinics, but you would be charged if you have them there. Other vaccinations such as the yellow fever vaccination are not available on the NHS and must be paid for, whether they are obtained from your GP surgery or from travel clinics.

**Precautions against malaria**

It is very important that travellers to malarious areas take precautions. People who have had their spleen removed are at particular risk of becoming very unwell if they develop malaria. Precautions consist not only of anti-malaria tablets but also of being scrupulous in avoiding mosquito bites with the use of mosquito nets and insect repellants.

There are a large number of different antimalarial tablets available – the choice depends largely on the resistance patterns of the parasite that causes malaria in the area to which you intend to travel. You should consult your GP or travel clinic to obtain the up-to-date recommendations. Antimalarial drugs are not funded by the NHS, so you would have to pay for them privately, even if you are prescribed them by your GP.

If you are still receiving chemotherapy treatment or any other medications for your lymphoma, you should ask your lymphoma specialist or GP whether the antimalarial tablets recommended would interact with any of your current treatments. In general, it should be possible for you to find a safe and effective way to help prevent malaria but you should seek advice about this.
Where can I find additional information?

Your GP or travel clinic should be able to give you good travel advice. There are also some excellent websites with relevant information (see below for web addresses and phone numbers where these are available). Many of these also provide advice on preventing flight-related deep vein thrombosis (DVT), taking medicines abroad and sun safety.

**Macmillan Cancer Support** produce a booklet called ‘Travel and Cancer’, which is also available on their website.

89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ
② 0808 808 00 00
www.macmillan.org.uk

**The National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC)** is funded by the Health Protection Agency and provides travel health information for health professionals and the public.

National Travel Health Network and Centre
UCLH NHS Foundation Trust
5th Floor West
250 Euston Road
London NW1 2PG
www.nathnac.org/

NaTHNaC does not offer telephone travel advice to the general public but they suggest you telephone the **Hospital for Tropical Diseases** in London on 020 7950 7799 (calls from landlines cost 50p/minute).

**NHS Direct** will provide callers with travel-related health information. They advise you to visit the ‘fit for travel’ website (see below) and can also be telephoned on:

② 0845 4647 (England and Wales)
② 0845 4 242424 (Scotland, NHS 24)

**Fit for travel** is a public-access website provided by the NHS (Scotland). It gives travel health information for people travelling abroad from the UK.

www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk

**The World Health Organisation** has comprehensive advice on travel vaccinations:

**The US Government Centers for Disease Control** website gives good specific information on vaccines and has a section regarding vaccine safety for immunocompromised people.

wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/

**The Travel Doctor** website, originally created by a doctor and a pharmacist in South Wales, provides useful advice on immunisation and antimalarial tablets and precautions, as well as a list of private travel clinics throughout the UK.

www.traveldoctor.co.uk
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More information
The Lymphoma Association has a wide range of booklets and information sheets on all aspects of lymphoma and the treatments that are available. We also have information sheets on vaccinations and immunisation, splenectomy, sun safety and travel insurance. Visit our website at www.lymphomas.org.uk or telephone our freephone helpline (0808 808 5555) if you would like to receive any of this information or if you would like to talk to someone about your lymphoma.

We would also be interested to hear from you if you have any feedback about this publication – you can contact us via our helpline or email publications@lymphomas.org.uk if you would like to make any comments.

References
Field VK, Ford L, Hill DR (editors). Health information for overseas travel 2010: prevention of illness in travellers from the UK (the ‘Yellow Book’). 2010. The National Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC), London.


We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate but it should not be relied upon to reflect the current state of medical research, which is constantly changing. If you are concerned about your health, you should consult your doctor. The Lymphoma Association cannot accept liability for any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information or third party information such as information on websites which we link to. Please see our website (www.lymphomas.org.uk) for more information about how we produce our information.

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