

22 Apr 2020

## **Stranded abroad during coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: access to medications**

### **Advice for travellers who cannot immediately return to the UK**

- **This updates the news of 15 April 2020**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to unprecedented international border closures and other restrictions. All countries may restrict travel without notice.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) provides [guidance for British people travelling overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). On 17 March 2020 the [FCO advised against all non-essential international travel](#) [1]. As of 8 April 2020, the FCO states this advice to British Nationals applies for an indefinite period due to unprecedented international border closures and other restrictions [2]. The FCO [advises British travellers who are normally based in the UK to return now](#) if commercial flights are still available [2,3].

### **Advice for travellers**

If you are abroad and cannot immediately return to the UK and are concerned you may not have enough medicines (including antimalarials) or disposable medical equipment, you should contact your travel health insurance provider for advice about how to get safe medical supplies at your destination.

Other sources of information include:

- the International Society of Travel Medicine who provide a searchable [Global \(Travel\) Clinic Directory](#).
- the nearest [British Embassy, High Commission or Consulate](#) as they may be able to direct you to recommended local healthcare resources. **However, they cannot provide or pay for medical treatment or medical supplies.**

Please do not wait until your supplies of medication or equipment are very low. In many countries medicines and equipment are not as easily available and the current COVID -19 situation may affect supply chains.

This is especially important if you were advised to take malaria prevention tablets (chemoprophylaxis) for your destination.

Follow the ABCD of malaria prevention:

- **A**wareness of malaria risk
- [B](#)ite prevention

- **Chemoprophylaxis (malaria prevention tablets)** - continue to take your tablets as advised. Make sure you have enough malaria prevention tablets:
  - for the duration of your time in the malaria risk area
  - and for the length of time you were advised to take your tablets after you leave the malaria risk area.
  - If you do run low, cannot get further supplies and are unable to come home, be especially vigilant with bite precautions. If you develop a fever or other illness, try to get to reputable medical care straight away.
- **Diagnosis** - prompt diagnosis and treatment without delay. Get urgent medical help for any symptoms, such as fever or flu that could be malaria, as prompt treatment is essential.

[Falsified \(fake\) or substandard medicines](#) are a global problem but are more common in certain regions and can be a significant health risk [4]. Buying medicines and medical devices that are not genuine online could lead to serious health consequences [5]. Antimalarial medication can also be fake, a recent report from World Health Organization details falsified chloroquine products in the Africa region [6]. Chloroquine is not a recommended antimalarial for most British travellers in Africa.

The use of chloroquine for prevention or treatment of COVID-19 is not indicated. There are currently no studies that evaluate the use of chloroquine to prevent COVID-19 [7]; Human studies to determine whether chloroquine is effective for treatment of COVID-19 are being undertaken [8].

Obtaining medical supplies in person in a recognised clinic or pharmacy, ideally under the supervision of a doctor, is the preferred way to obtain medicines overseas. You should observe any lockdown regulations in place in the country you are in relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and take local advice about access to medical and pharmacy services at this time.

If you choose to buy medical supplies online, always purchase from a registered pharmacy or reputable retail outlet [4].

## **Advice for travellers who have returned to the UK**

If you bought additional medication supplies when travelling or have started a new drug regime prescribed abroad, contact your own doctor for a review once you are back home.

If you have returned from a malaria risk area and are unwell, you must get urgent medical advice. Remember to tell the health professional you have travelled to a malaria risk area in the last six months. **If you have a fever and are phoning NHS 111 for advice, please state that you have returned from a malaria area and need an urgent, same day malaria test** (malaria film). During the COVID-19 pandemic, NHS 111 will advise how you can travel safely to your local A&E department for this to be carried out [9].

## **Advice for health professionals**

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals present with a fever. Some will have *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria, which can be fatal if not diagnosed and treated. All individuals being assessed for possible COVID-19 must be asked if they have **travelled abroad in the last six months**. If they visited a country where malaria occurs, they must have a blood test result for malaria on the same day [9, 10].

## **Resources**

- [COVID-19 \(coronavirus\): general advice for travellers](#)
- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\): Travel advice - coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Medicines and travel](#)
- [Public Health England - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance](#)
- [World Health Organization - Substandard and falsified medical products](#)

## References

1. [Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Press Release. Travel advice against all non-essential travel. Foreign Secretary Statement. 17 March 2020. \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
2. [Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Guidance. Travel advice: coronavirus \(COVID-19\). 8 April 2020 \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
3. [Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Press Release. Foreign Secretary advises all British travellers to return to the UK now. 23 March 2020. \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
4. [World Health Organization. Substandard and Falsified Medicinal Products. \[Accessed 9 April 2020\]](#)
5. [Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. #FakeMeds: Protect your health when buying medicines online. Undated. \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
6. [World Health Organization. Medical Product Alert N°4/2020, Falsified chloroquine products circulating in the WHO region of Africa. 9 April 2020 \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
7. [Principi N, Esposito S. Chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine for prophylaxis of COVID-19. April 17, 2020; \[Accessed 22 April 20\]](#)
8. [EU Clinical Trials Register \[Accessed 22 April 2020\]](#)
9. [TravelHealthPro. Malaria reminder during COVID-19 pandemic. 19 March 2020. \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)
10. [Public Health England. Guidelines for malaria prevention in travellers from the UK 2019. \[Accessed 15 April 2020\]](#)