

20 Mar 2023

Travelling abroad for treatment?

Consider your plans carefully before you book any treatment or procedure abroad

Travelling abroad for treatment (medical tourism), including cosmetic surgery, is not new [1]. All surgery has risks, whether you have it in the United Kingdom (UK) or abroad [2]. However, standards of medical facilities and available treatments vary widely around the world. If you are considering medical treatment abroad, do your own research; do not rely upon private companies that may have a financial interest in arranging your medical treatment overseas [3].

Complications from cosmetic surgery abroad have increased as UK residents seek cheaper treatment overseas [1, 3]. Complications have ranged from wound healing problems to life threatening sepsis. In some cases, intensive care treatment and further emergency operations were needed following the initial procedure. Some people have also returned to the UK infected with hard to treat, multi-drug resistant bacteria, increasing the risk of spreading those bacteria to other people in the UK [1].

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office reports that 25 British nationals have died in Turkey following medical tourism visits since January 2019 [3].

In March 2023, an outbreak of [botulism](#) in European travellers, who all received botulism neurotoxin injections linked to weight loss in Turkey, was reported [3, 4]. Cases ranged from mild to severe illness. Several people were admitted to hospital, with some needing intensive care treatment [4].

In November 2023, the [British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons](#) advised that the number of UK residents needing hospital treatment after cosmetic surgery abroad has risen by 94% in the past three years. In the four years up to 2022, a total of 324 people needed surgery after they returned from treatment in overseas countries, including Turkey, the Czech Republic and Lithuania [1].

Overseas dental treatment is also becoming more popular. In 2022, the British Dental Association reported concerns from dentists treating UK residents who had developed complications after dental procedures abroad. The most common issue was failing or failed treatment, then pain and poorly carried out procedures [5].

Travelling abroad for treatment can increase your risk of complications, including permanent disability, unnecessary treatment, infection, antibiotic resistance and exposure to blood-borne viruses such as [Hepatitis B](#) and [HIV](#).

Cosmetic surgery abroad can be less expensive compared with the UK. However, travellers should weigh up any savings with possible risks and consider what will happen if there are complications, either immediately after the procedure or later on [2].

Unlike the UK, many countries do not have free emergency healthcare. There could be long-term health issues and financial consequences if a medical or dental procedure goes wrong abroad. Unnecessary or ineffective treatment, lack of aftercare and non-existent support for complications are all issues reported by UK residents after treatment abroad [1, 5].

The British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society advise weight loss surgery is a complex

intervention requiring at least two years of support from a specialist team with dietetic, nursing, psychological and surgical expertise, and lifelong annual reviews. They advise this type of surgery is best done in the UK where surgical standards are high and rapid access to expert help is more straightforward [6].

See our factsheet [Medical tourism \(travelling for treatment\)](#) for more detailed information.

Advice for travellers

Before you travel

Discuss your plans carefully with your UK doctor, dentist and/or hospital specialist before booking any procedures abroad.

Consider the cost of follow-up treatment in the UK if there are complications, as this can be very expensive, as it may not be covered by the NHS [1, 5].

Use the NHS [Treatment abroad checklist](#) to help you plan your trip.

If you are planning dental treatment abroad, see the General Dental Council's [Going abroad for your dental care](#) guidance.

Beware of any hospital which markets cosmetic surgery as a holiday package. Do not agree to cosmetic surgery before meeting the surgeon carrying out the procedure and visiting the hospital where the procedure will take place [2].

Do not accept advice from a travel agent, sales representatives or administrators.

Speak directly to the doctor, dentist or nurse who will be carrying out your treatment before you book your trip. Check their qualifications and references independently. Ask them about aftercare and follow up and inform them of your full medical history, including all the medication you take.

Check the clinic or hospital carrying out your procedure is registered with local health authorities and is fully insured. Check if they have international accreditation. Accrediting bodies include [Joint Commission International](#) and the [International Society for Quality in Healthcare](#).

Make sure you are able to communicate; check if you speak the same language as clinic or hospital staff.

Get comprehensive [travel medical insurance](#), tell your insurance company about your treatment or surgery plans and make sure your policy covers the cost of any complications and medical evacuation back to the UK.

Check entry requirements at your destination, including medication restrictions. See the [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office country pages](#) for more information and to see if you need to apply for a visa before travel.

See your GP, Pharmacist, Practice Nurse or Travel Clinic before you travel to check if vaccines and/or malaria tablets are recommended for your destination.

Country-specific information can be found on our [Country Information pages](#) and [Outbreak Surveillance section](#).

While you are away

Visit the hospital or clinic before your procedure takes place and do not go ahead if you are unhappy with any aspect of care.

A face-to-face consultation with the health professional who will carry out any planned surgery or treatment must take place before any procedure. You should be given the opportunity to change your mind during this consultation.

Confirm arrangements for aftercare and check what will happen if there are complications, or if you are unhappy with the results of your procedure.

If appropriate, check medication, including pain relief, has been prescribed and is available before you undergo any surgery.

Make sure you are fit to travel home- if you have had surgery or dental treatment, your doctor or dentist must check you are well enough to fly. Potential risks of flying after surgery include [deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism](#) and you may need medication to help prevent this.

Check your airline is happy for you to travel and think about who will look after you on the flight.

Remember to ask for copies of all your treatment records, including prescriptions, scans and x-rays before you leave.

When you return

Be aware that if things go wrong abroad, you will usually have to pay for treatment. Follow-up care might not be easily available and may not be covered by the NHS.

Advice for health professionals

Health professionals can check our [Country Information pages](#) for vaccine recommendations and specific risk advice.

Travellers planning treatment abroad should be advised to make sure all their [routine UK vaccines](#), including [Diphtheria, Tetanus, Polio](#) and [Mumps, Measles, Rubella \(MMR\)](#) vaccines are in date.

Travellers may not be aware of the potential for increased risk of exposure to blood-borne viral illnesses in some regions of the world. [Hepatitis B vaccination](#) should be offered if appropriate for the planned destination and [HIV](#) and [Hepatitis C](#) risks should be discussed with all travellers planning any invasive procedures abroad.

Resources

- [British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons: Safety in Surgery](#)
- [British Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons: Cosmetic Surgery Abroad](#)
- [Fit for Travel: Medical Tourism](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Foreign travel checklist](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Foreign travel insurance](#)
- [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender foreign travel advice. Advice for transgender travellers going overseas for medical treatment](#)
- [General Dental Council: Going abroad for your dental care?](#)

- [Human Fertility and Embryology Authority: Fertility treatment abroad](#)
- [Medicines and travel](#)
- [NHS: Cosmetic surgery abroad](#)

References

1. [British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. Cosmetic Tourism Update. 13 November 2023 \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)
2. [Royal College of Surgeons England. Thinking of Having Cosmetic Surgery Abroad? 2023. \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)
3. [Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Medical Tourism. Health. Foreign travel advice Turkey. Last updated 1 December 2023. \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)
4. [European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Botulism cases in Europe following medical interventions with botulinum neurotoxin. 14 March 2023. \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)
5. [British Dental Association. UK dentists picking up the pieces from dental tourism boom. 14 July 2022. \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)
6. [British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society. Statement on going abroad for weight loss surgery. January 2023. \[Accessed 28 December 2023\]](#)