



British Heart
Foundation

Travel and your heart

Planning a trip

There is a lot to think about when planning a holiday or short break away.

If you, or a member of your family, have a heart condition here are some handy hints and tips.

**FIGHT
FOR EVERY
HEARTBEAT**

bhf.org.uk

Vaccinations

If you are planning a trip abroad you may need to have vaccinations before you travel – depending on where you are visiting. Make an appointment with your practice nurse or nearest travel clinic to check you are up to date. Some need to be given several weeks before you travel, and you may need more than one to complete the course. Some countries also require a certificate of vaccination before they allow you entry. For more information visit fitfortravel.nhs.uk/home.

High altitudes

The higher you go above sea level, the less oxygen there is in the air. This means that less oxygen will be carried in your blood. If you have a heart or lung condition, or suffer from severe anaemia, this may cause you to become extremely breathless and bring on the symptoms of angina. If you are planning to stay more than 2000 metres above sea level it is important to have a chat with your GP first, especially if you have recently had a heart attack or heart surgery or you have angina

Travel insurance

Finding the right level of insurance cover can be complicated, especially if you have a medical condition.

For more information and a list of insurance providers recommended to us by heart patients, visit bhf.org.uk and download a copy of our Insurance information sheet. To order a copy call **0300 330 3311**.

EH11 European Health Insurance Card

If you are planning a trip within the European Economic Area (EEA), an EH11 card entitles you to state provided treatment, on the same basis as if you were a resident of that country. It covers any necessary medical treatment due to either accident or illness. However, this may not be equivalent to services provided by the NHS here in the UK, and it may not be entirely free of charge.

For more information visit postoffice.co.uk/health-insurance-card.

Extreme temperatures

If you have a heart condition extreme weather conditions, especially cold weather, can worsen your symptoms. There are more hospital admissions, and more deaths, from heart disease and stroke during the winter time – particularly among the elderly.

Cold weather

If you're planning a trip somewhere cold you need to avoid hypothermia, which is when your body temperature falls below 95°F (35°C). Symptoms include clumsiness or lack of coordination, drowsiness, mental confusion, and sleepiness. Shivering is not always a symptom, and many people do not realise they are becoming hypothermic so it's important to be aware that this may not always be obvious. Hypothermia is a life-threatening condition that needs immediate treatment.

Tips to keep warm:

- Wear several layers of clothing, including a hat as much of the body's heat is lost through your head.
- Keep your hands and feet warm as they can lose heat quickly.
- Have hot meals and drinks regularly throughout the day.
- If you have a heart condition heat your home to at least 18 degrees.
- Stay inside if it's particularly cold.

Hot weather & sun exposure

If you're planning a trip somewhere very hot you need to avoid dehydration and heat exhaustion, which can lead to heatstroke. Symptoms include sweating, cold clammy skin, dizziness, fainting, muscle cramps, heat rash, oedema (swelling) in the ankles, shallow or fast breathing, nausea and vomiting. Heatstroke can develop very suddenly, and rapidly lead to unconsciousness, which is a life-threatening condition and needs immediate treatment.

Tips to keep cool & enjoy the sun safely:

- Keep out of the sun between 11am and 3pm and avoid extreme physical exertion.
- Stay in the shade. Wear a hat and sunglasses, and loose fitting clothing.
- Apply a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 and a high star rating, and reapply it regularly.
- Avoid extreme physical exertion.

Saunas, jacuzzis and steam rooms

If you have a heart condition or have high blood pressure, it is generally advisable not to use spa facilities – including baths, saunas, and jacuzzis or steam rooms. Sudden changes in temperature can put extra strain on your heart and circulation. Before doing these activities have a chat to your GP first.

Air travel

Evidence shows that most people with heart and circulatory disease can travel by air safely without risking their health. However, you should inform the airline of your condition in case they may need to put in place any extra safety measures. For example, if you need assistance at the airport terminal or during your flight or if you may need oxygen.

You should **always check** with your GP or heart specialist before flying, especially if you:

- have recently had a heart attack or heart surgery
- have recently been in hospital because of your heart condition
- are feeling unwell and your condition is worsening.

The British Cardiovascular Society (BCS) has produced expert guidance for both people with heart and circulatory disease and healthcare professionals, called Fitness to fly. Visit [bcs.com](https://www.bcs.com).

If you have any concerns about travelling it is important to discuss these with your doctor or specialist.

Airports and security

Cardiac devices

If you have a pacemaker or an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) you should take your **device identification card** or a letter from your doctor confirming you have a device, with you to show the airport staff before you go through security screening. If you are asked to pass through the security system, walk through at a normal pace and don't linger. Most modern pacemakers and ICDs are well shielded against outside interference and so problems are very unlikely, although the metal casing may trigger the security alarm. If a hand-held metal detector is used, it **should not be placed directly over your device for longer than is necessary and sweeping repeatedly over your device should be avoided**. If you have had stents inserted in your coronary arteries or have a mechanical valve, you can safely walk through the security system as normal. They will not trigger the alarm.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) can provide you with further advice and information on the **safety aspects** of airport security systems if you have a pacemaker or an ICD. For more information visit mhra.gov.uk

Medication

Only pack medicines in your cabin bags that you may need during your flight. All other medicines should be placed in your hold luggage. You may want to check with your airline or airport as they may have restrictions and guidelines about what is allowed, especially if your medicine is in liquid form and its container holds more than 100mls.

- It is safe for you to use your GTN spray whilst you are on a plane.
- If your medicines need to be stored in a fridge ask your pharmacist for advice on keeping it cool during your flight, for example using a cool bag.
- Make sure you pack enough medicines to last your entire trip – you may even want to pack a little extra in case of any delays.
- If you are travelling through different time zones make sure you know when you need to take your medicines.

Travel documents

You may want to take a copy of any recent clinic letters you may have, or other documents which hold important medical information about you and your heart condition. Some people also choose to take a copy of their ECG with them.

Physical activity and sport

Diving

Immersion in water causes the blood to redistribute itself around the body causing physiological changes such as a change in pressure in the chest and in the brain. The effects of these are greater, the deeper you dive. When the water is colder than body temperature, as in the sea, these changes are even greater. In some cases it can reduce your heart rate and increase your blood pressure. You may be unable to go diving if your heart condition puts you at risk, either in or under the water, and you may need to have a medical fitness test first. If you are thinking about diving have a chat with your GP or visit the Sport Diving Medical Committee (UKSDMC) website at uksdmc.co.uk.

If you have any concerns about travelling it is important to discuss these with your doctor or specialist.

Heart Helpline

Our cardiac nurses and information support officers are here to answer your questions and give you all the heart health information and support you need.

Call us on 0300 330 3311

Similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers.
Lines are open 9am - 5pm Monday to Friday.

This information does not replace the advice that your doctor or nurse may give you. If you are worried about your heart health in any way, contact your GP or local healthcare provider.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and pulmonary embolism (PE)

A DVT is when a blood clot develops in one of the deep veins in the leg. More often or not your body dissolves the clot naturally, however it can break off and travel up to the heart and lodge in the lungs. This is a pulmonary embolism (PE) and can be fatal. If you are taking a long-haul flight, or other long journey, you can feel reassured that for most people the risk of developing a DVT is low.

The risk may be higher if:

- You have had a DVT or PE before.
- You have recently had surgery.
- You are overweight.
- You are pregnant.
- You are taking the contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy (HRT).
- You have a heart condition, cancer, a blood disorder or varicose veins.

If you have any of these risk factors for DVT you are advised to wear support stockings. It is important that you have your legs measured to help you to choose the right size. If the socks are very tight, they can do more harm than good. **If you have trouble with the arteries or veins in your legs you should speak to your doctor first as you may not be able to wear stockings.**

If your doctor thinks you are at a particularly high risk of developing a DVT then an anticoagulant (blood thinning medicine) may be recommended. If you regularly take an anticoagulant or an anti-platelet, for example warfarin or aspirin, you should continue to do so as directed by your doctor.

Symptoms to look out for:

- Pain, tenderness or swelling in your leg (usually at the ankle or calf).
- Skin in the area (of the clot) that is red and warm to touch.

Things you can do:

- Stretch your legs out regularly, moving your feet up and down at the ankles.
- Try to walk up and down the aisle.
- Drink plenty of water, avoiding alcohol (which can cause dehydration).
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and support stockings if possible.

If you have any concerns about travelling it is important to discuss these with your doctor or specialist.