



GUIDE TO MEDICAL TOURISM

About this guide

Medical tourism – travelling abroad for medical or dental treatment or surgery - is becoming more and more common for people in the UK. Cosmetic surgery abroad is becoming popular with patients who combine low cost surgery with a holiday in tourist destinations such as Cyprus, Greece, Spain and South Africa. The reduction in NHS dental services is encouraging people to look overseas to countries such as Poland and Hungary for savings on expensive treatments such as dental implants and cosmetic dentistry. And people faced with an NHS waiting list or who have concerns about infection in UK hospitals are seeking overseas treatment for heart conditions, hip and knee replacements and general surgery.

But, for the patient considering medical tourism, there are many concerns. What are the conditions like in clinics overseas? Is the surgeon or dentist suitably qualified? Where can I get the best deal? What questions should I ask about the treatment?

This guide attempts to answer those questions and guides the patient through the medical tourism process. It has been developed through the experience that we have gained through operating the Treatment Abroad web site (www.treatmentabroad.net).

About the Treatment Abroad web site

Treatment Abroad (www.treatmentabroad.net) is the UK's leading web site on medical tourism. The site provides access to information about clinics, hospitals, and specialists in Europe and the rest of the world that are attracting patients from the UK. For many destinations, we provide information covering the healthcare services available, doctor accreditation, treatment costs and travel and accommodation.

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Is treatment abroad for you?

Medical tourism, as it is now known, is a growing industry and more and more countries are jumping on the bandwagon to offer people competitively priced elective surgery, cosmetic surgery and dentistry abroad.

Overseas healthcare is a safe and viable option but it is important to do some research beforehand:

- Read all you can and talk to people who have been abroad for surgery to help make your decision
- Scan the newspapers or TV to see which countries are getting good press for their medical expertise. India's health care sector, for example, has undergone an enormous boom in recent years and has become a global health destination offering some of the best medical treatment in the world, despite the perceived shortcomings of healthcare in developing countries. Meanwhile closer to home, European countries like Belgium, Hungary and Poland are offering excellent cosmetic dentistry and cosmetic surgery treatments for reasonable prices, and are only a short flight from the UK.
- Look out for exhibitions on medical tourism and meet international healthcare providers at events such as India's Medical Tourism Expo in London or Turkey's Healthex London Exhibition (February 2007).

The reasons for choosing to travel abroad for medical treatment are different for everyone but with lengthy NHS waits and concerns about MRSA in NHS hospitals there is little wonder that a growing number of Brits are taking advantage of affordable, high quality private healthcare abroad, and combining it with a tropical, cultural or relaxing holiday on a Caribbean island, in a cultural European capital, or the south of Spain, saving thousands of pounds compared with having the treatment done privately in the UK.



However medical tourism does not appeal to all; decide whether being away from your home and family to have surgery/treatment would bother you, do you often feel home-sick when holidaying abroad? If you feel it could be for you, then find out what you need to consider.

What to consider?

Find out as much as possible about the procedure you are interested in - an informed patient is more able to make an informed decision. With cosmetic surgery and cosmetic dentistry different techniques and materials may be used for different procedures, so find out which method and materials are used by the provider. It is imperative that you compare services, treatments, costs and credentials of providers (see the Treatment Abroad web site - www.treatmentabroad.net - for cost comparisons and read some of the patient stories on the web site for an insight into other people's experiences.

Think about how long you want to go away for and how far you are prepared to travel. Will you have to go alone, or will a close friend/member of the family be able to accompany you? (Some providers often provide escorts for those traveling alone). Try to be as flexible with your schedule as you can as you may have to stay longer if there is a complication, and it is preferable that the surgeon and provider treat you there and then, rather than at home when it becomes more difficult.

However tantalising the prospect of cosmetic surgery in an exotic country like Malaysia or South Africa sounds, will you be comfortable on a long flight and would your doctor deem you fit for traveling long distance? Don't let the allure of a holiday in an exciting destination you haven't visited before become more important than the reputation of the surgery/dentistry/medical treatment in that particular country.

Having an operation/surgery closer to home can be advantageous. if you decide to return for further treatment or if it is necessary to go back for follow ups - it will be much cheaper and easier to do this in Europe than a far flung destination.



Deciding where to go

Take a look at the destinations on www.treatmentabroad.net. Each country varies in terms of savings, costs and areas of surgical specialty. Within Europe, Poland and Hungary are popular destinations for low cost dentistry, Belgium for cosmetic and elective surgery, and France attracts patients for obesity surgery, orthopedic and heart surgery. Even with the cost of flights to exotic places such as Malaysia and Venezuela, the savings are still beneficial and can often outweigh the cost of surgery alone in the UK – and you get to enjoy a holiday in a country you may not have been to before.

Find out if the intended procedure is available in your chosen country. There are different types of healthcare providers from major hospitals to smaller clinics and private practices, so decide which you would prefer, and whether you want to deal directly with the provider, or go through a company working as a medical tourism tour operator (an agent or broker), who will arrange the full trip abroad, putting you in touch with recommended health providers and organising your medical care, accommodation and travel within a lump-sum package.

If you are going directly to the provider make initial contact via their website or by telephone to enquire about the surgery you are interested in.

- Ask for some literature and brochures detailing more information about costs and the surgeon's professional background etc.
- Find out all you can about the hospital/clinic's reputation - the more you know, the more prepared you are.
- Ask if initial consultations and follow ups can be done in the UK as some doctors come to the UK periodically to visit patients. If so, check whether the consultation in the UK will be with the same surgeon to perform the operation, or with a nurse or advisor. Seeing the surgeon / dentist for a consultation locally will give you a better understanding of what is involved and a good consultation will inform you of what the surgeon believes are the best procedures for you as well as outlining any possible risks and complications.
- If it isn't possible to meet the consultant locally you should ask to speak to them on the phone or email and ask as many questions as you like. Have your medical history to hand when you do so.
- Check whether after the operation you will stay in the hospital or be discharged and taken to a hotel; ask about special care or assistance after the procedure and about contingency plans in case of complications during the procedure or recovery time.
- Do they recommend having a close friend or family member travel with you to provide support?
- Find out when the country's high season is so that you can avoid exorbitant flight prices and enjoy more moderate weather.
- Be honest with yourself about the importance of going to a country where fluent English is spoken and choose your destination accordingly as some medical staff in clinics and hospitals abroad do speak fluent English, while others hire translators.
- Read up on local costs, the prices of meals, transport and hotels, how easy is it to travel around and whether it is considered safe to do so. The Foreign Office website will help with this and provides tips on traveling abroad with its Know Before You Go campaign

Comparing the costs

Get quotes from the healthcare provider or medical tourism agent/broker; many offer surgery packages including flights, accommodation and transfers. Look up the country's currency and exchange rate so you have an idea of how far your money will go in the country of choice.

With so many budget airlines around, the medical tourism experience can be very affordable. During low season, return flights to Hungary can be purchased for as little as £40 with no frills airlines such as Sky Europe or Wizz Air and even with more far flung destinations such as India the overall cost can be extremely affordable - return flights are advertised from £455 with British Airways to Delhi and Mumbai and substantial savings are still made because surgery is so competitive...and of course your money goes a long way in India with around 80 Rupees to £1.

In most cases you will find there are good savings to be made by going abroad for treatment, and the cost will be cheaper than having the same procedure carried out privately in the UK. Take a look at the price comparisons on Treatment Abroad - www.treatmentabroad.net. As an example, the typical cost of Rhinoplasty (nose reshaping) in Croatia, Egypt or Turkey is around £1,500, compared with between £3,000 and £4,000 in the UK, while in India, Rhinoplasty will cost just £850.

Many of the providers will collect patients from the airport and chauffeur them to their hotel and collect them for hospital appointments, so find out whether this will be the case, and if not read up on your selected country's travel section to find out about its public transport systems and the various costs for this.

When speaking to the provider or medical broker always make sure you fully understand exactly what is included in the cost, as low prices may be offered and then extras could be added on afterwards. Ask what happens regarding the cost if a complication arises. Prices vary from provider to provider but they can typically include surgeon fees, hospital fees, medical team, hospital meals, laboratory tests, anaesthesia, implants (if appropriate), all consultations, all transfers (airport and hospital), medication, local mobile phone use and English speaking personal assistant.

In your negotiations with the provider/broker establish the means of payment. Will they require payment in advance, and/or a deposit? Do they accept credit card, money transfers, or do they want cash payments? Is it possible to pay by installment? Before handing over any money ensure you see a valid contract first.

Get everything clarified beforehand and factor in the cost of passport and/or travel visas, flights, airport pick-up, travel to-and-from medical provider, accommodation, food and drink including any tips, phone calls and other correspondence with family at home, medications or medical supplies such as crutches for hip/knee patients which may be needed post-op.



Checking out the surgeon/dentist

Making sure that you have chosen the right surgeon or dentist begins with finding out about the qualifications and accreditations the dentists, doctors and surgeons should have in order to be practising in their country, and secondly checking that the professionals you will be seeing have these in place. Often surgeons and dentists working abroad train and qualify in the UK and if that is the case then practising doctors will be listed on the General Medical Council's (GMC) register. Cosmetic surgeons may be members of the British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) and cosmetic dentists may be listed on the General Dental Council's (GDC) register or may be members of the British Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (BACD).

Many countries have similar associations which regulate the qualification and accreditation of surgeons and dentists. For example, the Belgian Society for Plastic Surgery is equivalent to the British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS) and the Philippine Dental Association equivalent to our General Dental Council. You can find out what associations and accreditations exist within the specific country sections on the Treatment Abroad web site - www.treatmentabroad.net.

You can also expect surgeons to have international memberships such as with the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) or the European Association of Plastic Surgeons (EURAPS). Ask whether those based in Europe are 'Board Certified'. Cosmetic surgeons trained in the US may be members of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS).

Checking out the clinic/hospital

Check to see that the proposed provider/country lists which professional regulatory bodies oversee its private clinics, and if not, ask. In the UK for example, the assessment of clinics is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive, the Healthcare Commission and local primary care organisations who conduct practice inspections.



Usually the Health Division of the country's government e.g. the Czech Ministry of Health oversees clinics along with the relevant country's Medical Council and/or associations. Ask for the name of the clinic/hospital where the surgery will be carried out, and find information online. Have a good read of the provider's web site which should have plenty of information about their clinics and services including details of the surgeon's qualifications/accreditation and what surgery they perform.

Some suggested questions include:

Will the operation take place in a private hospital or at the doctor's clinic?

Do they use an outpatient clinic or a hospital?

Are they certified with the local and national health organisations?

Do they have a crash cart (used in case of emergency)?

How far is the clinic from an intensive care unit in case of emergency?

What are the post operative infection rates?

Questions to ask the surgeon or dentist overseas

There are many questions to ask the surgeon but the most important aspect is about safety, so grill the surgeon as much as you need until you feel reassured. If you don't understand something don't be afraid to say so – remember this is your body/teeth/life and what this surgeon does will remain with you for the rest of your life so make sure you have all of your questions answered. You are entitled to choose which surgeon performs your procedure, and not just be given whoever is available on that particular day.

Some suggested questions include:

What professional memberships, training and qualifications do they hold? (Afterwards go to the relevant association's website to verify that their name is on the list)

Have the surgeon and anaesthetist worked together before? This is critical as they build up a relationship and can better monitor the patient's needs

Will the anaesthetist perform a pre operative evaluation? And a post operative evaluation?

Will the anaesthetist take into account the patient's wishes (provided it is safe to do so)?

How much recovery time will the procedure entail?

How long will you be hospitalised?

How soon after the operation can you fly home?

Ask to see credentials and 'before and after' pictures.

As far as checking the rest of the medical team, remember that a good surgeon will only work with a good anaesthetist and in a good hospital/clinic - so the most important part is finding a good surgeon!

Our UK site www.privatehealth.co.uk has an extensive checklist of questions to ask your doctor before an operation

What guarantee should you expect?

Whether at home or abroad there are no guarantees regarding the result of any surgical or dental procedure, and this is especially true with plastic surgery where the results vary so much with each individual, and the perceived goal could be very different from the attainable goal. However, the one guarantee a patient CAN ask for is that if a complication should arise, the surgeon or dentist will correct it without additional fees.

Standards of legal protection for patients vary from country to country and once a provider is chosen, research the legal situation (you may wish to call the relevant country's embassy or consular office) and find out what protection you have as a visiting patient and use the web to research patient protection laws.



What to check in the document

Once you have decided on a provider or a broker ask for everything to be outlined in an agreement or contract which clearly describes the services provided to you at the agreed price. Check if there is anything you are not sure about and get someone else to read over the contract for you. Standards of legal protection for patients vary dramatically from country to country. One of the points that potential patients should check is the refund policy in case:

- you change your mind once you arrive.
- you have a pre existing medical condition that causes the surgery to be cancelled.
- you can't get all the procedures you have paid for.

It is also important to clarify the clauses regarding follow-up care and what happens if anything goes wrong. This varies for someone having a hip replacement to someone having dental veneers but it is expected that the provider will stand by their patients and the work, and do whatever is necessary to make it right. Be sure to clarify this beforehand.

How to compare different providers

The bottom line is to choose a provider/company/surgeon that you trust and feel most comfortable with. If the people you are dealing with seem unsympathetic or impatient with your questioning then take that as a sign and go elsewhere. As a paying customer, it is the patient's right to ask as much as they want to establish whether or not to go ahead with a procedure.

Whether you are dealing with a provider directly or going through a broker be sure to address ALL of your questions and concerns beforehand, and to get a firm estimate/assessment of costs and scheduling – you won't want to deal with these issues after your procedure so be prepared, and don't be caught off guard.

Every company has a different policy regarding the length of stay. The ideal length of stay will ensure that there are no complications and that the patient can come back home safely and without surprises. Choosing a company which offers holiday packages can be advantageous but should not distract from the main objective which is the surgery itself. Equally, hospitals or individual surgeons won't be as adept at organizing the logistics of travel or accommodation so if you're not a seasoned traveler it might be advisable to go through a broker who takes care of both.

Remember it is perfectly natural to have some anxiety before a major operation/dentistry/cosmetic procedure whether you are having it done in the UK, or abroad, but doing so in a foreign country will raise concerns about safety so ensure you do your research, ask questions and then ask some more until you feel confident that you are in good hands. If you are happy with the answers given, if you have done all the essential checking of the policy, verified their qualifications and credentials (as advised in this guide), feel comfortable about having the procedure in your chosen country and have done all your calculations so you know exactly what is involved in the cost and feel confident about the surgeon's abilities then you have probably found the right provider for your procedure.



But if you have any doubts at all at this stage, voice them with the relevant people, or go to another provider.



What not to do

Go for cosmetic surgery or dentistry based only on pictures or email correspondence;

Choose a country based solely on its tourist merits, without fully checking out the reputation of the surgeons, dentists, clinics or hospitals;

Go ahead with a procedure if you're not fully comfortable or happy with what's happening, or with the surgeon who is going to do the procedure. Remember that you are entitled to change your mind at any time, even five minutes before the operation.

The practicalities of going abroad for treatment

After the initial enquiry phone call or email has been made, and a formal quote for treatment received, the next step is the consultation process, to assess whether a patient is a good candidate for the procedure(s) requested. A consultation is also a good opportunity to learn about anything the surgeon requires you to do beforehand, such as lose weight or take certain vitamins to help the recovery process. With dentistry for example, it's normal that digital photos and x-rays are all the consultant sees until the patient arrives and pictures don't always show exactly what is going on, so a pre-consultation process with a local surgeon will not only help provide extra information to the surgeon abroad but make the patient's consultation more accurate.

Check that you have a valid passport. If it needs renewing pick up an application form from your local Post Office or apply online via the Passport Office. Check also whether you will need a visa to visit the country, how long this lasts and whether you can get it upon arrival or if it should be pre-arranged. Many providers/brokers will help and advise on visas and passport matters as part of their service. Make sure you take photocopies of your passport, visa and other documentation and keep them separate to your hand luggage and leave details of where you are going with someone at home. Don't forget to take the contact details of someone in the UK who can be contacted in case of emergency.

Familiarise yourself with your chosen country's culture and customs. What are the local customs, religions and etiquette? Is it customary to tip, and if so, how much?

It's a good idea to purchase some local currency in advance and take either traveler cheques or credit cards which can be used to withdraw money from local ATMs.

Find out what clothing will be appropriate and make a list of some of the tourist attractions you might want to visit. You should also consider personal safety, check the Foreign Office website for any risks in the country you are visiting that you should be made aware of, and whether you can drink the local water or will need necessary vaccinations. With major operations plan recreational activities such as diving, surfing, hiking, safari tours, or taking a road trip before the procedure because time to relax and recover will be needed afterwards.

What to do if something goes wrong

All operations carry some risk and while it is hoped that all medical, dental, or cosmetic procedures will go to plan even with a smooth procedure it is wise to exercise some caution. Plan properly for the recovery period and anticipate any possible complications. Allow some flexibility to your schedule – just in case. Know what to expect - ask the doctor for detailed instructions and to explain what is normal and what is not for the days following the surgery.



After an operation, complications can arise but immediate postoperative problems will be solved during a patient's stay in the hospital. Depending on the procedure a patient might do their own follow up care with their local GP so it is important:

- a) that you have a good and reliable GP in place and
- b) that you tell your GP that you are going abroad for treatment.

After cosmetic surgery procedures you are more likely to deal with UK medical specialists post op and some medical tourism providers include ongoing consultation with the UK specialist after your return to be sure that healing is successful and to ensure any concerns are addressed.

It is important to clarify what is in place in terms of complications and risks of infection before going ahead with the procedure as policies vary between providers. If infections or other problems do occur once back in the UK you should get in touch with the surgeon, and follow their instructions. If you are really worried you should see your GP or go to the Accident and Emergency department of your local hospital if you can't get hold of your surgeon. If you are unhappy with your surgery or it has been badly performed talk to your surgeon immediately to seek a resolution.

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Treatment Abroad
helping you make the right choice

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