

# MEANINGFUL TRAVEL TIPS AND TALES

HEALTH & CHRONIC ILLNESS ABROAD



An Initiative to Make Travel More Inclusive



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Welcome

[A Note From GoAbroad](#).....3

[Our Contributors](#).....4

### Tips

[Chronic Illness + Study Abroad: What You Need to Know](#).....5

[Your 7 Step Pre-Departure Plan](#).....9

[Your Go-To Resources for Traveling with a Chronic Illness](#).....11

[Can I Volunteer in a Developing Country with my Chronic Illness?](#)...14

[How to Manage your Symptoms in an ESL Classroom](#).....18

### Tales

[A Diabetic American in Paris](#).....21

[Rewriting the Rulebook](#).....23

### Get Involved

[Questions & Comments](#).....26

# WHY WE CREATED THIS BOOK FOR TRAVELERS WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

## A NOTE FROM GOABROAD



According to the [National Health Council](#) and [CDC](#), about half of all adults have a chronic condition and more and more people are living, with not just one chronic illness, but with two or more conditions.

Whether it's diabetes, arthritis, asthma, Crohn's disease, severe food allergies, or a whole host of different chronic illnesses— symptoms, treatments, and medications will vary just like individual travelers' bucket lists. Traveling with a chronic illness may be a little tricky, but the logistics of it shouldn't, and won't, prevent you from enjoying your life on the road.

Travel is not one size fits all. We believe the dominant narrative in travel and international education needs to shift to be more inclusive, and look outside the lens of your typical go-getter, able-bodied, happy-go-lucky, nothing-ever-goes-wrong traveler. So, while you might need to do a little extra research, pick your foodie spots carefully to accommodate dietary restrictions, and maybe skip that big hike if your inhaler is running a little low, none of this should stop you from embarking on your big adventure abroad. You can travel, study, intern, teach, and volunteer abroad with a chronic illness, but most importantly, you can thrive while doing it.

As part of GoAbroad's push for more inclusivity in travel, our writers share their personal experiences, resources, and advice about managing their health and chronic illness abroad. We want our readers to be inspired to travel, but to always prioritize their health and well-being above all else.

Interested in joining this initiative? [Partner with us!](#)

# OUR CONTRIBUTORS



**Madeline List** is a circumnavigator, researcher and chronic travel addict. She's always looking for a new adventure, whether it's across lines of latitude or in the backyard. When she isn't on the move you can find her jamming on acoustic guitar or climbing rock walls and aerial silks.



**Davis Webster** is a Colorado-born writer currently residing in Galway, Ireland. He received a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in mathematics from Colorado State University in 2016. When he is not busy travelling, he writes about teenagers falling in love and dying or about his adventures with Tinder. He dreams that someday his travels will lead to a private tour of the ABBA museum in Stockholm.



After intermittent volunteer stints in South Africa, Guatemala, and India, **Niki Kraska** decided to quit her job in the U.S. to pursue a life of full time international volunteering and writing. She uses her experience working in non-profits to volunteer wherever her heart leads her and plans to pursue an international master's program to further her impact, because, Ubuntu.



← This could be you! Want to share your own travel tips and tales? [Give us a shout!](#)



# CHRONIC ILLNESS + STUDY ABROAD: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

by Madeline List

A lot of us are creatures of routine. The decision to live, work, or study abroad uproots us from the rhythm of the day-to-day and introduces new people, cultures, languages, and systems. For most, the departure from a well-adjusted life at home is a necessity and a refreshing step to gaining exposure to everything new and exciting that awaits us beyond our literal and figurative borders.

But, if you're one of the millions who live with a chronic health condition, that predictability of the everyday routine is anything but negative. Predictability means you know where your doctors are, where your next treatments will come from, or which 24-hour pharmacy will answer your late-night phone calls. Leaving healthcare norms is truly a privilege; even imagining an extended period of time away from the health systems you know and depend upon can be straight-up frightening.

Because of this, many people with chronic illnesses will elect not to go abroad. For many, this is a wise and calculated decision. Still, there are many who are stable enough to enjoy a meaningful travel experience. If that's your dream, there are absolutely ways to make it happen. Don't let the fear of "elsewhere" derail a powerful and potentially life-changing experience.

**Here is what you need to know about planning for your time abroad:**

## Are You Even Ready for, or Capable of, Travel with a Chronic Illness?

Unfortunately, not everyone with a chronic illness is in a position to leave home. If you're considering living, studying, interning, working, or volunteering abroad, your first phone call should be to your doctor. He or she will need to determine if they can provide long-distance medical oversight, if the treatments you need will be available in other countries, and if you're in good enough condition to take the chance of being away. Listen carefully to their advice and do not go unless they give you the green light.

When it comes to chronic health conditions, your situation is uniquely yours! You might be approached by acquaintances who have a cousin or brother-in-law or dog trainer with a horror story about how they tried living abroad with a certain illness and rushed back in tears on an emergency flight. Whatever that story may be, it's not an example for everyone. Your decision to go or stay needs to be made with the medical professionals who care for you and know you best.

When speaking with a doctor, keep in mind "abroad" is quite a general term. If you are in a bit of a precarious health condition, you might be able to live in a country with a familiar language and an established and well-developed healthcare system, but not spend a semester in the Ugandan countryside. Be sure to tell your doctor what kind of program you are considering so that they'll be able to give you an informed response to your questions. This means doing your research beforehand; compare programs, read reviews, and form a shortlist of potential programs before you even approach your doctor.

## Finding Appropriate Medical Professionals Abroad

If you have extra health needs, you'll want to start researching and planning well in advance so that you can avoid any unforeseen surprises. Ask your doctor if they have any colleagues who practice near where you'll be living, or if they can connect you to people who might. For some practices, there may be a professional database that they have access to.

If these methods are unfruitful, speak with your program coordinators to find out about local, qualified professionals. If you don't already have experience looking for practices that will suit your needs, find out the experiences and qualifications a doctor will need to have in order to provide you with adequate care. This will make the process easier in case someone from your program needs to do research on your behalf.

## Getting Medical Equipment/Medications Through Customs

Under advice from the customs website, I once brought a doctor's note in order to bring narcolepsy medication into Singapore. I didn't end up needing it, but it was worthwhile to have the paperwork in case anything went wrong. Check online to see if there are any restrictions on bringing your medicines and medical equipment into certain countries, and submit a personal inquiry if there are any ambiguities. You do not want to have anything confiscated!

Sectioned pill containers are fantastic for organization and terrible for customs checks. Keep all medicines in labeled pharmacy bottles with your legal name printed on them. Don't crush pills or mix different kinds of pills within a labeled container.

Avoid sending medications in the mail if you can help it. Mail can be heavily screened and you won't be immediately available to answer pertinent questions about what's in the package. If you do need to have medication or equipment shipped to you, make sure it's labeled, follows all regulations, and is shipped with some cushion time in case it is intercepted or needs to be resent.

## Learning About New Medical Systems and Insurance Schemes

It's always a good idea to buy an insurance package when spending an extended amount of time abroad, but if you have more needs than average you'll want to double and triple check the fine print. Will you have access to coverage at nearby clinics, or the doctors you need to see? What's the protocol in emergency situations? Are your prescriptions covered in your plan? If you aren't receiving a comfortable amount of coverage, consider purchasing supplemental insurance. Otherwise, potential out-of-pocket costs should be considered when assessing the financial feasibility of living abroad.

As a general policy, try to bring all of your medicines and equipment on the trip abroad so that you don't have to rely on an unfamiliar system. You can usually get a vacation override through your domestic insurance in order to have long-term supplies filled at a local pharmacy.

## Communicating with Your Study Abroad Program About Your Health Condition

On a trip to South Africa, one local informed me that if you get sick in the country, it's more convenient to head straight to the cemetery than to a public hospital. That wasn't something I would have figured out intuitively, but locals have perspective on the national healthcare system that won't necessarily be spelled out online. It can be quite helpful to have a frank conversation with the program staff in-country who are familiar with the locale.

There's a common fear that alerting a program in advance will set off unnecessary alarms about your ability to participate. However, the staff can act as your advocates on the ground, and you'll need to foster an honest relationship with them to deal with your health once you leave home. They're called in-country support for a reason. They're there to support you! Be forward about your level of functionality and make sure to emphasize that your doctor has given you the all-clear to live abroad. Let them know what you'll need, and what the consequences of not having your needs met will be.

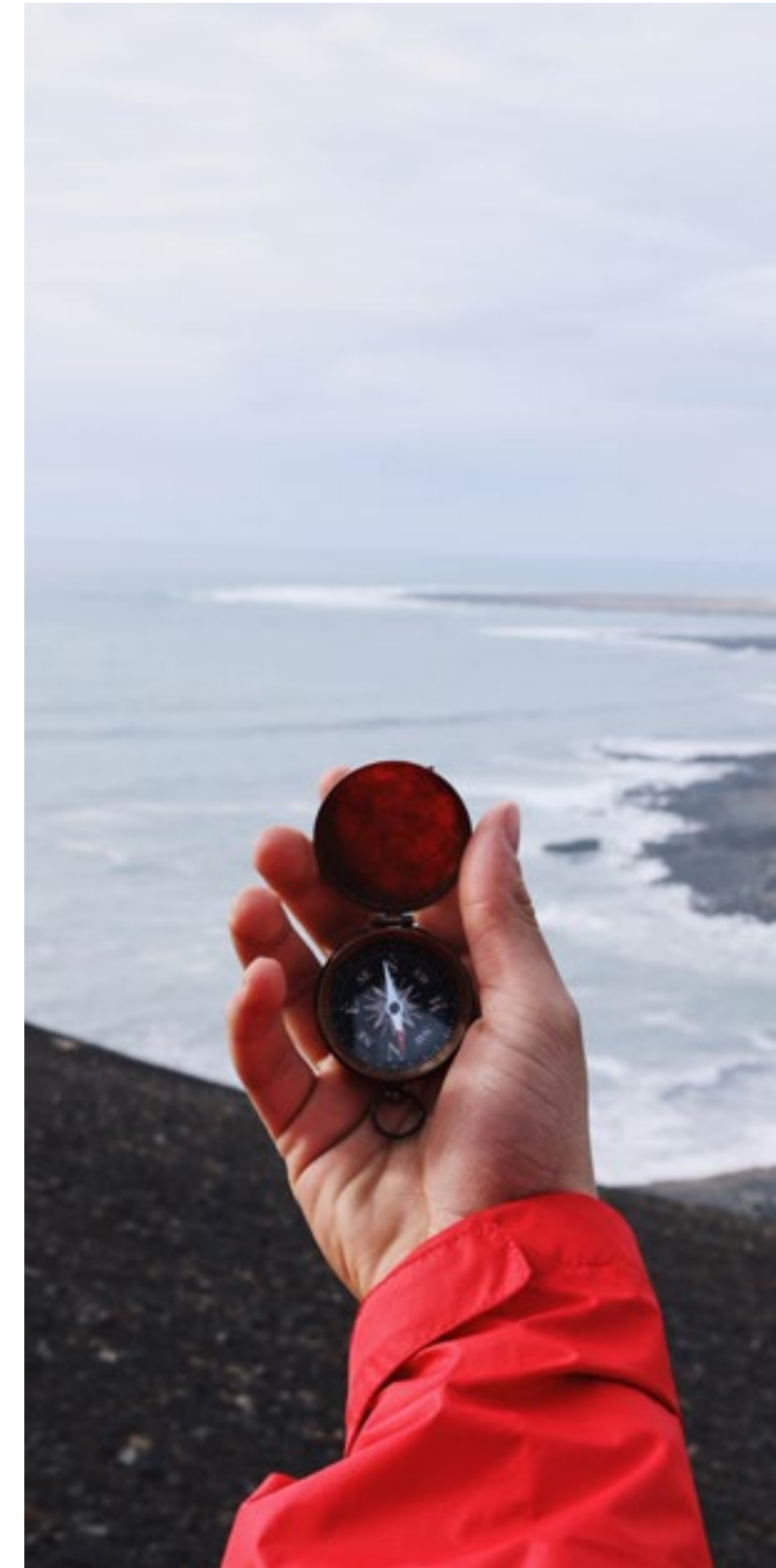
Program staff can also inform you of details that are difficult to research. For instance, if you have special dietary needs, they can help you to understand if you'll be able to acquire special food while in-country or if there are some foods you might want to bring from home.

Your program is your partner in supporting your health during your time there, but they cannot and should not be relied upon to support you single-handedly. Let them know that you're aware of that. Your maturity and responsibility will put them at ease, and your preparatory research will make you better equipped to manage your condition once you relocate.

## Other General Research Before Going

Make a list for yourself of important environmental factors that help you stay well and start planning to make sure that those are accommodated while abroad. Do you need a special place to keep equipment? Access to a refrigerator for medications? A nearby place to buy special food? These are all things you can bring up and plan for with your program or host family.

At the end of the day, living with a chronic illness is a little bit different, but that shouldn't stop you from having a coveted new experience. Plan a little more, take the time to cover all your bases, and then embrace your situation and enjoy the ride. You might not be the kind of person who can send a deposit to a program and quickly set off with only a suitcase and dictionary in hand, but you are someone who can immerse themselves in all the thrills of learning and exploring a new country and culture.



# YOUR 7 STEP PRE-DEPARTURE PLAN

by Davis Webster

Let's not waste any time with this. You've got adventures to have and the next great travel memoir to write. Here is your foolproof step-by-step pre-departure plan if you're traveling with a chronic illness.

**Warning:** You will need to make a few phone calls, prepare yourself for the holding music.

## Step 1. Call Your Insurance Company

Do this as early as you can. Do it before you buy your plane tickets or even before you have a destination completely set. Let them know that you are planning a trip and you have a chronic illness so they can check your coverage. Whether you're traveling alone or planning to participate in an international program, you will likely need special authorization for coverage abroad, so make sure you give yourself plenty of time before to get the paperwork all sorted out.

## Step 2. Call Your Doctor(s)

The doctor you see for your chronic illness has probably had plenty of patients travel and can fill you in on the little condition-specific details you need to know. Can you go through a body scanner with your medical equipment? What kind of documentation do you need to go through customs with your medicine?

How much medicine should you bring with you? Your doctor can answer these questions or find someone who can. Mine even puts together a travel plan for each of my trips.

## Step 3. Research, Research, Research

Now that you know the details of your insurance coverage and have discussed the trip with your doctor, you can start searching for programs, nailing down locations, buying tickets, and planning your trip. In my traveling, I don't really like having a set plan. I prefer to just wander and see where I end up. However, that doesn't mean I don't plan at all. I figure out where I can get medicine if I need it, what medical service is like in different countries, and even how common my illness is. If I am well-informed before I leave, then I can wander without worrying or running into surprises.

## Step 4. Network

This will probably happen while you are researching. There are a ton of travelers out there and chances are there are at least a few with your illness. Look for message posts or blogs or anything that mentions the area of the world you are visiting and your condition.



If you're planning on studying, volunteering, interning, or teaching abroad, reach out to program coordinators and see if they can connect you to alumni with your illness. These people can offer you advice and support for your trip. I've even had people give me their phone numbers and tell me they will share their medicine if something happens to my supply on my trip. You never know how helpful people can be until you reach out.

## Step 5. Create a Back-Up Plan

Now you should have more information and resources than you can possibly use, so it's time to put it together into something useful. I like to call this the "show must go on" plan. It's the plan you use when something bad happens, but it's not bad enough to end your trip. For me, this is my plan for issues like losing a piece of luggage with equipment or medicine, an equipment malfunction, or something like that. I know exactly what to do and where to go if this happens.

## Step 6. Create Another Back-Up Plan

This is the catastrophic plan. What do you do if an issue arises that does end your trip? Or requires an extended hospital stay? This is the one where knowing your insurance policy well (as well as the healthcare system of whichever country you are in) can really help.

I always make sure I know how much a long hospital stay will cost me, how much an emergency plane ticket will cost, and that I have the funds or someone willing to provide the funds should I need them. This is also where travel insurance can be very useful if you can afford it. This step is always overkill, but it relaxes me every time I start to panic.

## Step 7. Get a Folder with All Your Docs

This step is the easiest (and easiest to forget), but one of the most helpful. Just buy a folder and fill it with any medical documents you may need. In my folder I keep a travel letter from my doctor, copies of my prescriptions, an extra insurance card, and typed copies of my backup plans. I always keep it in the same pocket of my backpack, so I know where it is no matter what. It's one small, final step that allows you to be fully prepared so you can worry about your illness less and enjoy your trip more.

So, here's to seeing the world and writing the next great travel memoir— or YA novel, whichever comes first.



# YOUR GO-TO RESOURCES FOR TRAVELING WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

by the GoAbroad Writing Team

**A**sthma. Crohn's. Celiac. Arthritis. Diabetes. And maybe the worst: food allergies. While all of these chronic illnesses (and more) might make travel a little tricky, it doesn't mean that you can't enjoy and thrive with a life on the road. Sure— you may have a more limited diet, a stronger need to know where the nearest bathroom is, or keep the complicated pronunciations for the vocabulary words of your illness in the local tongue handy. You might not get to indulge in all of that bread or climb the tallest mountain sans inhaler. But it shouldn't stop you. And it won't.

As you study, volunteer, teach, or intern abroad, lean on these resources (spoiler: they're ample!) to ensure your meaningful travel experience is one to remember.

## Your Primary Care Physician or Specialist

Okay, yeah, duh. But, it is important to keep in mind your doctor back home doesn't just stop being your doctor when you're abroad. Just in case your doctor doesn't realize this (unlikely, but not impossible), make sure you communicate with them in pre-departure check-ups and physical exams. Keep their contact information and a medical clearance letter from them with you always. While they won't be able to help you directly in case of emergency, being able to keep in touch and check-in, even if it's over the phone or via skype, could be beneficial.

The only person who knows your illness better than you do is your doctor. So always keep them close— even when you're across the world.

## In-Country Program Staff

Your in-country program staff will be your life-line when studying, volunteering, interning, or teaching abroad. Their entire job description is being a resource for you, the participant, so take advantage of that. They'll likely be able to help you find a reliable pharmacy, should you need one, and even a local physician— who might not be a specialist with your illness, but can at least contact your doctor back home and review your medical history to help with any urgent needs.

It's important to communicate your needs and educate your program coordinators and support staff about your illness. You don't have to give them the exact chapter from Gray's Anatomy, but provide enough of an overview and any necessary information or documentation to ensure they can do their jobs effectively and keep you feeling healthy, safe, and happy!

## Program Staff Back Home

Your coordinator's counterparts back home will also serve as an extra life-line while you're abroad.

Not only will they keep copies of any important documents and doctor's notes for you, but they'll be on chain-of-command for notifying your parents and/or emergency contacts should anything come up. They're there to support you as well as their in-country counterparts.

You will have had to communicate with them extensively prior to departure so that everything goes as smoothly as possible during your time abroad. They will likely have helped other participants traveling with a chronic illness, and will know all the necessary steps and precautions for you to take. You should definitely keep your program advisor's contact info with any other emergency numbers your program provider may give you.

## Your University

If you're a student participating in programs abroad with a chronic illness, your university is also a great resource to take advantage of, even while you're not on campus. Not only will your personal advisor have a wealth of information about other students who have successfully studied abroad, but they'll have access to a lot of necessary documentation, should you need it in a pinch.

Your university health center and RDS (Resources for Disabled Students) office will also be able to provide you with any necessary information and support while you're abroad. Moral of the story? Keep in touch with your university while you're abroad.

## Your Insurance Provider

This is a big one. Not only will they help you maintain your health coverage while abroad and provide you with a bulk-order of any medication you might need, but your insurance provider is also going to know where you can and cannot get any necessary prescriptions filled. Always keep copies of your insurance information with you as you travel— especially if you plan on hopping between countries frequently.

Your insurance provider may also already have an established list of physicians or health centers abroad where your plan is accepted. If not, you'll need to coordinate between your insurance provider and in-country program staff to make sure you have access to everything you'll need while abroad. Take advantage of those 24-hour hotlines (though, you hopefully won't need it).

## Your Friends and Family

Someone has to be your emergency contact, right? That will likely be one of your parents, siblings, or a close friend. They aren't only there for you in times of crisis, of course, they'll be there to celebrate your victories, too. They'll be there cheering you on during that break-through with a tough-to-crack ESL student, and help keep your spirits high on those days when your symptoms are acting up, and maybe you need to take the day off to rest.

In the hierarchy of who knows you and your illness best it goes; your doctor, you, your parents, and finally your closest friends. Even though they may not be able to support you physically, you'll still be able to lean on them when things get a little rough abroad. Skype, WhatsApp, and other social media sites/modes of communication make it easier than ever to still feel close when you're far away.

## A Few Links to Bookmark

Here are a few helpful bookmarks to have on your laptop or whatever mobile device you might be taking with you on your travels. This isn't a comprehensive list, but most major transportation companies will have accessibility information available online, or at least provide contact information for whoever you need to chat with to make proper arrangements.

The [Center for Disease Control](#) has a great help-page for travelers with chronic illness, with information about different types of travel insurance and traveling with medicine and supplies, in addition to a few more tips to prep for your trip abroad.

[AmTrak](#) has a lot of great information for any traveler who may need additional assistance or accessibility for a physical disability. This is for train travel in the U.S.

[U.S. Department of Transportation](#) is a good resource for American travelers going abroad and includes information about filing formal complaints (which you hopefully will never need to do). It also has great information for accessibility with air travel, should you need additional assistance.

[Eurail](#) has information on the accessibility of its trains, though it's important to remember that accessibility will vary between country and railway station. You can also book train tickets directly through the Eurail website (nifty!).

Use the [GoAbroad Embassy Directory](#) to find your nearest embassy and get more information on the visa process as well as any information about what medications you can and can't take into certain countries.

## Ready, Set, Go!

With these resources up your sleeve you're sure to have a wonderful experience abroad. Participating in programs abroad is all about pushing you out of your comfort zone and testing your limits; remember that your health and safety always come first, but ultimately you know yourself, your illness, and your body best.



# CAN I VOLUNTEER IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY WITH MY CHRONIC ILLNESS?

by Niki Kraska

While my chronic illness and yours can be very different, there is one thing we probably have in common: we've gone through the ups and downs of learning to adapt to keep our lives as "normal" as possible regardless of our condition.

When I was 18 and diagnosed with an autoimmune disease, I didn't take it very seriously. Sure, the symptoms sucked at first and figuring out exactly what was wrong with me was a pain, but once I stabilized on my medication, the disease floated to the back of my mind, only resurfacing when I had mild flare-ups of symptoms again. I told myself I would face this illness when I was older and "had more time."

When I was 21 and my diagnosis prevented me from fulfilling my dream of joining the Peace Corps, I was devastated. Now, I saw my condition as stupid, trivial, and unfair. I was told I had a small chance of serving in Eastern Europe, but my heart was set on South America or Africa. After three months studying and volunteering in South Africa, and one week volunteering in Guatemala, I never thought my medical condition would hinder my travels abroad.

Flash forward to 2016, and I just finished my third volunteer trip in India, a total of 8 months and counting in a developing country I consider a second home.

So, to answer the question, "Can you volunteer in a developing country with a chronic illness?" I respond with a resounding: YES!

Will you sometimes be told "no?" Will you have to take extra precautions? Will you need to prepare even more for those just-in-case emergencies? And, will there be days on the road you really, really wish you didn't have a chronic illness? You bet.

Now that you know you can do it, the next step is to prepare yourself physically and mentally so you can arrive and put your focus where it belongs—on the beneficiaries of the project.

## Why Would a Project Say No to Me?

Sometimes, even when you think you have your illness under control, a volunteer project may not be able to accept you. This was my exact case. I was taking medication daily, I was managing the occasional arthritic aches, and I hadn't had a full-blown, can't-walk-up-the-stairs-flare-up in three years.

You can imagine the series of "but, but, but...!" that came out of my mouth when they told me I couldn't be medically accommodated due to my diagnosis. Looking back at it, I now see why – I was still having doctor's appointments and lab work done regularly, and we were kind of waiting around to see if I would get better or worse. While I was confident in my projection, that's probably not something the Peace Corps (let alone any volunteer org) wants their members to wait for while on the outskirts of a rural village for two years.

Do not get discouraged if something similar happens to you! If you are FOR SURE the exact program and project you've applied for is what you want to do, there are always extra efforts you can take to appeal the decision, especially if your doctor or an additional specialist can vouch for you.

If you aren't attached to one specific project, then there are a multitude of programs in developing countries to look through and choose from. Programs with shorter durations or in locations with adequate medical facilities will be better equipped to take on volunteers with different medical concerns.

## So How Do I Choose a Program that will Work for Me?

If you want to volunteer abroad for four weeks or less, you should get the green light in pretty much any developing country as long as your illness and symptoms are stable.

Since meds come in monthly dosages, you'll be able to carry what you need, bring enough suitable snacks, or whatever else it may be that you need to sustain yourself.

If you are thinking of a few months to a year long trip, then you have different factors to consider. For example, are there certain environmental and living conditions that are more suitable to your condition? If so, then find a program that, for the most part, fits.

Countries like China or India may not be the best matches for volunteers with asthma or an inflammatory bowel disease. But, if crossing them off your list gives you sad eyes, just look for programs that offer weekend trips to big cities with most of the work in less polluted towns or that have accommodation with filtered water and home-cooked meals.

You may need to be a little flexible to find a program that fills all your requirements, but with the sheer number of volunteer programs out there, I'm sure it exists.

## How Do I Make Sure I'm Prepared to Volunteer?

It can be nerve wrecking for anybody to think about healthcare services while abroad let alone someone with a chronic illness. Luckily there is a lot you can do ahead of time to thoroughly prepare yourself so you can put your mind at ease.

Once you've done a quick self-check in and [asked yourself if you're really ready to be an international volunteer](#), applied for your program, and run all the way through [your pre-departure plan](#), remember these few extra steps to make sure your stint volunteering is a success:

**Talk to program staff.** Let them know any requirements you have, and also assure them that you will be responsible in taking care of your health. It will benefit both you and them to identify in advance any potential risks and what you would need to do should a medical concern arise.

They will also be able to give you more information on the type of healthcare options you will have in your host country.

**Take the necessary health precautions.** These can include vaccinations, malaria medication, anti-diarrhea kits, sterile medical travel equipment, OTC meds, sunblock, bug spray, and hand sanitizer. Just ensure the vaccines and medications are suitable for you.

**Take care of yourself.** Those final weeks leading up to your big trip abroad are also crucial for keeping you healthy. Your body will go through an adjustment period those first few days, so you want to arrive strong and ready to withstand the transition.

And no matter where you go, **BUY TRAVEL HEALTH INSURANCE!**

## How Do I Make Sure I'm the BEST Volunteer?

Your work isn't done now that you've arrived. If you want to be the best darn volunteer the program has ever seen (or if you simply want to last the full 6 months), you aren't going to want the illness to get in your way!

**Set an alarm.** Even if you've never needed a reminder before, a volunteer's schedule can make it pretty difficult to remember to take your medicine before crashing on the bed after a long day.

**Talk with project leaders.** Maybe the information you gave to the pre-departure program staff made its way to the on-site staff, but maybe it didn't. There's no harm in confirming that the people who will see you daily are in the know.

**Locate a pharmacy.** It might take a while to find a pharmacy that carries the drug you are looking for. Do the search before you actually need the refill.



**Don't skimp on sleep.** I'm sure many of you can see the difference in your symptoms after a couple of nights with little sleep. Make it a priority. The kids, animals, co-volunteers, and anyone or thing you are working with will thank you.

**Be free...while staying conscious.** There is something about volunteering in developing countries that is freeing. Maybe it's not having cell phone service or a TV to distract you, or the way you see people truly appreciating life. It can be easy to get swept up in all the feels you got going on. Go ahead and let loose, but don't lose sight of what staying healthy entails for YOU.

**Be honest.** If something physically or mentally isn't feeling right, don't just push it aside. Ask for time to take a rest or grab a drink of water while you make sure it's not a worse symptom on its way. If you need a full day "off" – don't be afraid to ask for that either. Be honest with yourself and with others.

### At the end of the day...

You (and your doctor) are going to be the best judge on how ready you are to volunteer in a developing country and all that you will need to do in order to properly prepare. The best advice I can possibly give is to truly understand YOUR illness, not just what WebMD and Google understands for you.

Know your triggers, your symptoms, the feelings you get before a flare-up occurs, the unexplainable ways you've figured out to quiet your symptoms down. Become as much of an expert as you can on yourself, so you know when you can keep pushing and when you need to accept a helping hand.

I've learned how to better manage my illness while I've been volunteering in India more than I ever did back home. Maybe it's the additional motivation to maintain the energy I need to volunteer with the children, or maybe it's the fact that the people I work with encourage me to take the time I need to rest and rejuvenate more so than their American counterparts.

Go ahead and use your first trip as a short-term test run. See how your body responds. Learn what best supports you while traveling, as well as what developing countries can and cannot offer.

There will always be people that don't understand why you choose to put yourself in an area that could be risky for your health, "just" to volunteer. But we know better.

You aren't just volunteering. You're growing culturally, you're making a difference, and you're inspiring the next. And no chronic illness, or naysayer, is going to stop that.



# HOW TO MANAGE YOUR SYMPTOMS IN AN ESL CLASSROOM

by Niki Kraska

You've managed to get through the first day of class without spilling coffee on your white shirt, misspelling a word on the chalkboard, or falling for the whoopee cushion on the chair prank, so the rest of the year will be a piece of cake, right?

Alright, alright...it won't always be a piece of cake. That is just wishful thinking.

Being an ESL teacher comes with challenges, unplanned disruptions, and last minute changes almost on a daily basis. It may seem daunting to be responsible for lesson planning, test grading, homework checking, attention grabbing, and behavior correcting all while adapting to the varying levels of English amongst your students.

It may seem even more daunting if you are also trying to manage the symptoms of your chronic illness without it affecting the classroom.

The wonderful news is that [teachers with chronic illnesses](#) manage classrooms successfully every day, and managing an ESL classroom is no different!

Here are some effective strategies to keep your symptoms in check in the classroom and manage them appropriately when they decide to pop up.

## Make Self-Care Your New BFF

The importance of self-care cannot be emphasized enough, especially when you're [dealing with a chronic illness](#). Yes, there are the full-throttle teachers who are running six different clubs after class, guzzle coffee like gasoline, and somehow manage to stay smiling every. Single. Day. And that is great! But, that doesn't have to be you.

Find priorities. These will likely be along the lines of: being an engaging teacher in class, being in class every day as possible, being properly prepared with lessons, and maybe also keeping the one extra study session you hold each week. Choose YOUR priorities.

Then, take the steps you need to take to maintain those priorities! Don't let anything get in the way of your eight hours of sleep, spend three evenings a week in the yoga class you love, pack healthy snacks and lunches to keep up your energy...you get the drill.

Setting boundaries to p – a – c – e yourself is another high need when it comes to chronic illness in the classroom. Not signing up for the optional 5-hour seminar on Saturday or missing out on staff game night does not mean you are a bad teacher or co-worker.

Taking care of yourself enables you to take care of your classroom, which is exactly what you signed up to do.

## Don't Sweat the Bad Days

This is inevitable with chronic illness. Sometimes no matter what you do, your body decides it's going to act up.

Having a bad day doesn't mean you have to call in sick. It's perfectly OK to be human and not feel great while you are at the morning meeting and later while teaching your class.

Do anything you need to do to give yourself more support on these days. Maybe you don't turn the lights on in class to control the headache, or you teach from a chair instead of walking around the room. Maybe today is the day you add in more independent or small group work, or let students co-teach each other (sometimes that's more fun for them anyway!)

And of course, if you do have to call in sick – that's OK too! Giving yourself a day or two to recuperate could prevent you from overdoing it and missing an entire week instead. Remember that thing about pacing yourself? It's the real deal!

## Communicate with Your Supervisor/ Program Advisor/Institution

Be upfront. Feeling like you have to hide your illness or when you are feeling lower than low takes more energy than you need to spend.

In those first meetings as you are preparing to take on the position (or even if you have to schedule a private meeting), give your supervisor a heads up on what you are dealing with. If you need special accommodations, such as a first floor classroom or access to the elevator, now is the time to request it.

Tell your institution way in advance if you will be missing class due to doctor appointments at different times of the year.

If there is a chance you will be calling in sick more often than they would expect, be clear about this and ensure you are both on the same page about the protocol and policies in place for such days.

You also want to make sure the institution is the right environment for you. If there's one thing my chronic illness(es) have taught me, it's that I need flexibility in my schedule. If a program isn't willing or able to accommodate at least some flexibility, then it might not be the right program for me. A working relationship is a two-way street, so make sure your needs are also being met or it won't work out in the long run.

For the most part, your supervisor shouldn't need to worry about a thing. Discussing it ahead of time will probably calm your mind more when health concerns do arise (since they already are in the know!) and make for a happy teacher-supervisor relationship.

## Communicate with Your Students

If it's visibly obvious, then telling your students about your illness the first day makes sense. My former teacher with multiple sclerosis had a scooter, so it made sense for her to inform us right away about her condition and explain to us ways we could help her in the classroom. It was beneficial for all of us.

If no one would know by looking at you, and it's not something that will directly impact your teaching each day, then waiting after the first week, first month, first time you feel your symptoms coming up in class, whatever you are comfortable with, is fine.

Either way, be matter of fact. These are your students, not your friends. They don't need your entire medical history, the emotional side of the story, or what your illness looks like at its worst.

What they do need to understand is that you are human just like them and that part of you being human includes having a chronic illness.

They should know that you might have visibly good days and visibly bad days – or even visibly good days that are actually bad days – and that it's nothing that should cause them concern. Explain different things they may see you do to cope with symptoms in class, and what you may need to ask of them at times (for example, the small group work activities).

You can definitely educate them about the illness itself, too! You are a teacher in a school after all, and knowledge and understanding is always a good thing.

## Plan Ahead

Especially when you are away from home, family, and friends, you can't rely on those around you to know your exact needs should a medical issue arise while at school.

Creating an action plan in case something goes wrong is your responsibility. Make sure to have your insurance card and passport copy with you, as well as a document that lists your medications, diagnoses, allergies, and in-country and out-of-country emergency contacts. This is of course for the worst case scenario, but you want to be prepared.

Similarly, it is your responsibility to carry with you what you might need in less-urgent situations: painkillers, water, a fresh pair of pants, a stress ball, etc.

Researching the community you are teaching in ahead of time will also help you prepare for any cultural (siestas are encouraged – bring a pillow!) or logistical (toilet paper isn't a thing – pack your own) factors that could influence your needs.

## Enjoy Yourself

How cool is it that you get to teach ESL in a foreign country? Pretty darn cool. Don't let planning ahead, talking to administration about your needs, or practicing self-care take away from that!

**It all comes together as you watch your students leave your class more confident, adaptable, curious, and fluent.**

In fact, all of these things can only set you up for even more success and enjoyment as an ESL teacher, no matter what chronic illness you have and no matter where you are teaching.

Since you will be helping to keep your symptoms at bay and prepared for when they do arise, you can focus on what really matters – the rewards of teaching your students and watching them succeed.

From the anxiety of seeing new faces enter your classroom on day one and wondering how in the world you will manage, to a smile from the quiet boy in the corner, an A from the girl who has struggle all month, and a round of high-fives when the whole class passes the exam... it all comes together as you watch your students leave your class more confident, adaptable, curious, and fluent.

On to year two!



# A DIABETIC AMERICAN IN PARIS: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTINGENCY PLANS

by Davis Webster

The best thing about my insulin pump dying in Paris was that it picked the most poetic location possible to give up on life. As I wandered between the crypts of Père Lachaise cemetery, I felt the symptoms of a low bloodsugar starting: shaky hands, overwhelming hunger, and profuse sweating. That last one was the killer.

I took my pump out of my pocket so I could kill the flow of insulin and curb my blood sugar's descent, but no matter how hard I pressed the buttons, nothing happened. It quickly became clear that the film of sweat covering the device had worked its way into the casing and ruined the circuitry. I put the pump away and went to go find some sugar.

When I got back to my apartment, I called the manufacturer of the pump to report the problem.

The woman on the phone assured me that the pump was under warranty and they would replace it, but there was no way for them to get it to me in Paris before I left to continue my travels. Instead, it would be waiting for me at home in the U.S. at the end of my trip, six weeks and eight countries in the future.

The representative on the phone was relieved to know I had an emergency back-up plan and a stock of long-lasting insulin. I didn't tell her how close I had been to not bringing the long-lasting insulin with me. But, before I left, my doctor had insisted that I have a large supply of long lasting insulin. Despite her warnings, I was sure I wasn't going to need it and was concerned about how much room it was taking in my backpack. A few days before I left, however, I decided it wasn't worth the risk to leave it behind.

That meant I had everything I needed, except syringes, to continue my trip without my pump. And thanks to research I had done before I left, I knew syringes were readily available at pharmacies in every country I was considering visiting.

The moral of this story is to always have some sort of contingency plan in place— especially when traveling with a chronic illness. Without sounding too much like a broken record, your doctor, or your mom, you'll need to know what to do and what resources will be available to you while you're traveling. Better safe, with a slightly fuller backpack, than sorry.

**Here are the steps I take when something goes wrong:**

## Stay Calm

This sounds cliché, but there's a reason it's become a cliché: it's good advice. The most important thing to remember is that everything is going to be alright. Repeat after me: everything is going to be alright. It won't seem like it at the time, but it will work out; your trip isn't ruined and you're not going to die. If you have a chronic condition, you've had scares before. This is just another.

## Prioritize

Make sure you identify the most important problems and address them first. My insulin pump has only broken once and my blood sugar goes low several times a week, so the pump felt like the much bigger issue at the time. However, I knew I needed to find sugar before I did anything else or the situation would have gotten much worse and more dangerous.

## Implement your Backup Plan

If you prepared adequately, you should already have a plan for what to do in this situation. Now is the time to implement it.

This contingency plan will depend on your illness, your regular treatment plan and medication, any required emergency measures, and any steps you've already outlined with your doctor pre-departure.

## Find a Way to Communicate

As I said, I knew that if I needed to I'd easily be able to buy insulin syringes in any country on my itinerary, so I didn't pack any. This meant I had to go to a few pharmacies in countries where I had no knowledge of the language. Sometimes I found someone in my hostel who spoke the language to accompany me. Sometimes I just saved what I was trying to say on Google translate on my phone and handed it to the pharmacist. Once I just handed a pharmacist a syringe and hoped for the best (Do as I say, not as I do/have done.). Your own communication needs might be different depending on your plan, but just remember that you can always find a way to communicate. Don't rule out a full-on game of Pictionary.

## Be Friendly

It is really scary to have your medical equipment break— even in the comfort of your own home, so when it happens when you're in a new country thousands of miles away from home, it just gets exponentially worse. However, don't let this stress turn you into a jerk. My plans always involve talking to people and relying on others for help. If you stay calm and friendly, it will be much easier for you to get the help you need.

I was able to continue traveling happily and healthily with my backup supply of long-lasting insulin and every rag-tag attempt to get syringes from pharmacies across Europe. If my insulin pump's brush with death isn't enough to convince you that having a backup plan is necessary despite any superficial inconvenience it might cause (re: my over-packed backpack), well there isn't much more I can do for you at this point. Talk to your doctor. Know all your options. Do whatever it takes to ensure your health and safety abroad.



# REWRITING THE RULEBOOK: LIFE AS A TRAVELER WITH A CHRONIC ILLNESS

by Madeline List

I awoke in a spur of confusion, completely unaware of how long ago we had departed Tel Aviv and how close we were to Vienna. Turning to the passenger sitting on my right, I sleepily pasted a sentence together, asking in Hebrew if they, “already gave the meal.” She nodded yes.

But wait— something was wrong. I had spent the past year studying in Israel, my Hebrew was approaching fluency. Why was I speaking in such stubby lines, forgetting simple words like “serve” and “breakfast?” I felt nauseated to my core, my head felt as if it was on a carousel that it couldn’t dismount.

I’d seen these symptoms before, they meant I was starting to faint.

I wanted to recline but it was impossible in the contained space, the seat in front of me was so close that I couldn’t even get my head between my knees. I fumbled past the passengers beside me, determined to get to an area where I might be able to sit in a position that would help the blood flow back to my head. But the crew was still clearing breakfast and the people in the aisle were moving too slowly, I was running out of time.

Dark spots were appearing in my vision. I was hearing a high-pitched ringing that was escalating in volume. From past experience, I knew that I would only have 15-30 seconds of consciousness remaining. I did the only thing I could think to do and let my knees collapse onto the floor, doubling over in the middle of the aisle. This sufficiently scared the crew and they let me pass to an area where I was able to recover.

## Rewriting Travel Rules

I have a disorder where my body doesn’t produce proper collagen, the biological glue instrumental in holding together muscles, joints, blood vessels, and other important organs. The symptoms mostly manifest in disruptive muscle aches and a syndrome known as POTS, which basically means that when I’m sitting upright, my body struggles to pump blood from my feet to my head. When there’s not enough blood in the brain it’s goodbye consciousness, hello floor.

I have always been proud to call myself a traveler and always proud to consider it part of my identity. But, traveling with these health conditions poses its own set of challenges. Travelers, exchange students, and international workers endearingly share their advice on how to make the most of time abroad. As a traveler with chronic health conditions, I’ve learned that sometimes you need to tailor those lessons to your specific needs, or perhaps throw away the book entirely! Here are some common pieces of advice I hear as a traveler, rewritten for the travelers and aspiring travelers who need to take extra care of their health.

**The Adage: Let yourself adapt to the rhythm of life on the road.**

**The Truth: The health conscious traveler needs to plan around their daily routine.**

My near miss on the plane that day happened because I had committed a cardinal sin of traveling with a chronic illness: straying from the daily health regimen.

I forgot to take my morning dose of blood pressure medication because I was up in the airport all night, then I missed a much-needed meal falling asleep during breakfast. This left me without the medicine, nourishment, and hydration I needed.

If you’re a traveler with similar concerns, set alarms on your cellphone to help figure out when to take certain medicines or treatments as you switch between time zones, or when you’ll need time to eat, drink, or rest. The regimen that kept you healthy at home will continue to keep you healthy on the road and abroad, so take care to make sure you can stick to it. This might mean that you have to inject structure into your day or change your schedule in order to accommodate your needs. Use your judgement to decide when going with the flow can work and when it might put your health in jeopardy.

**The Adage: Always pack light**

**The Truth: Always pack what you need**

Medicines? Medical equipment? Back braces? A pack of food in case you can’t find the gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free meals that fit your normal diet? That stuff might weigh you down, but it’s also the fuel that keeps you running. Take all of it.

Packing light is wonderful. It keeps things simple and easy when moving from place to place. But packing light is also a luxury, something only available to people who don’t depend on a lot of materials in their day-to-day lives. I admittedly envy the travelers who can afford to wander for months with nothing but a backpack. But I’ve also learned not to be ashamed of the extra baggage when that “baggage” is what’s keeping you functional. If your suitcase is a bit bulkier because it’s carrying the objects that are helping you stay healthy, don’t waste a single second regretting that bigger (or extra) bag.

It’s also possible that the extra baggage might be a fancy travel insurance package purchased on the off-chance that something goes wrong.

If you're at a higher risk for needing medical attention abroad, insurance might be something you purchase for any trip, no matter how long or short.

**The Adage: Seize every moment of your time abroad**

**The Truth: Sometimes you just need a rest day**

Even if you're not a backroads adventurer, traveling is highly physical. You'll often find yourself on your feet for longer periods of time, in the sun more, having earlier mornings and later nights. That leads to some wear and tear on your body, even if you're a physically fit explorer. Learn to embrace your rest days. You might have to make sure you don't pack your schedule to the point of perpetual exhaustion, or you might want to alternate the activity-heavy days with days where you can have a leisurely breakfast, read on the veranda, or spend some time just lounging by the pool. You'll be able to rest and recharge for the more active days, and your body will thank you for the much-needed break.

**The Adage: You'll only regret what you don't do**

**The Truth: Respect your limitations**

Hitting the road will open doors to cultural and adventurous experiences you were not privy to at home, and because of that there is much advice and much temptation to take advantage of every new opportunity that you're presented with. But when your body is different, this might mean that you'll have to pass up some of these opportunities – whether it be because you need some extra rest or because the activity itself would put a strain on your body or routine.

That sacrifice is an unfortunate truth of traveling with health conditions. There might be mountains you can't climb, towns you can't trek out to, or foods that you can't eat. But you will always, always have a richer, more robust, and more enlightening life experience by choosing to go abroad than by choosing to stay in your normal environment.

## Focus on the positive experiences you'll have by taking your trip, and if the road is calling you— listen.

I've chosen not to spend nights out with wonderful people in order to go to bed early, missed some anticipated surf lessons on days when I felt I was at an increased chance of injury, or decided not to travel overnight in order to miss a repeat of that dreaded Tel Aviv plane incident. Those types of sacrifices are normal.

If you fear that your limitations might hold you back, don't let your anxieties stop you from missing everything you would have experienced by going abroad. Focus on the positive experiences you'll have by taking your trip, and if the road is calling you— listen.



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