

Staff travelling abroad: assessments and advice - Feature Article

Staff travelling abroad: assessments and advice

Employers and employees have responsibilities to prevent or minimise adverse consequences of overseas travel, which can be achieved through actions taken before, during and after travel. Jo Kitney reports.

Health and safety hazards and risks

Travelling abroad can expose staff to health and safety risks and although workplace health and safety legislation does not specifically refer to the management of overseas travel, these risks should be treated the same as other hazards and risks at work.

Overseas travellers face physical and environmental changes that have the potential for accidents, ill health, injury and death, with consequences compounded by local conditions and access to medical care and other support. Hazards and risks associated with overseas travel include outbound and return travel, generally in flight; changed road rules, vehicle and road safety; time zone changes — circadian rhythm disruption and “jet lag”; working locations and conditions; weather and climatic extremes; environmental and recreational accidents and injury, personal safety and security; infectious diseases and insect and animal bites; physical and mental stress; and limited access to, and poor standards of, medical/health care.

Legislation relating to overseas travel

Workplace health and safety legislation does not specifically refer to health and safety risks for overseas travel, therefore obligations under the Health and Safety at Work, etc Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 will apply.

Employers need to put in place arrangements that manage health and safety hazards and risks associated with overseas travel, including approval for travel; identification of hazards and risks; careful planning and precautions, staff compliance with health and safety measures and a clear understanding of actions to be taken in the event of an emergency, ill health or injury. Similarly, employees must accept their responsibilities for health, safety and well-being before, during and after travel.

Characteristics of travel

These will include destination, mode of travel, the purpose of the visit, duration, type and standard of accommodation, food and drink hygiene, and access to and standard of health/medical/dental care.

Characteristics of a traveller

This will comprise his or her health status, age, gender, knowledge, previous experiences, behaviour and lifestyle.

Risk assessment should be carried out well in advance of any travel. To be most effective, it should include the traveller, travel organiser, manager or department head. The risk assessment process can follow the same principles or five steps as for other health and safety issues, as summarised below.

Identify the hazards: identify the main hazards associated with overseas travel, taking into account the characteristics of the travel and traveller and associated hazards and risks.

Decide who might be harmed and how: for the most part it is the traveller who will be affected

by international travel, although others can also be affected, eg tiredness or jet lag resulting in tension with a work colleague, transmission of respiratory, skin or gastrointestinal disease to others at home or work, road traffic accidents affecting third parties and the impact of serious illness or death on colleagues, family members or friends.

Evaluate the risks: the nature and complexity of the evaluation of risk will be determined by the hazards of travel and the characteristics of the travel and traveller. A checklist or protocol is useful to ensure that all relevant information is obtained and considered. Key areas to consider in evaluating the risks are: the traveller's destination, method of travel and location of the accommodation; the time of travel and length of stay, as well as type of work and other activities undertaken while there; the suitability and fitness of the staff member to travel and work abroad; whether control measures are already in place and whether other controls are needed; and actions that will be taken in the event of accident, ill health or injury.

Record the significant findings: the findings of the risk assessment should be recorded and shared with those involved, in particular with employees who will travel abroad.

Review the assessment: As with other risk assessments, overseas travel risk assessments should be reviewed periodically or whenever there is reason to think that they are no longer valid.

Risk assessment and management

Factors influencing the likelihood and severity of issues arising from overseas travel are summarised below.

The principles of risk management should be used to control risks associated with overseas travel. Organisations should put in place an overseas travel policy with supporting procedures, checklists and forms that enable risks to be identified and evaluated, with control measures. Key components of an overseas travel policy and procedures are summarised below.

Preparation for travel includes travel itinerary, work activities, mode of travel, accommodation, employee fitness and management of existing health conditions and special needs, vaccinations, malaria prevention, first-aid kits, emergency contact information and insurances, training and information.

Travel to, from and during the trip should take into account the modes of transport, including any air travel, land and sea. Travellers should be advised about actions to minimise problems, and risks associated with local road transport and conditions should also be identified and managed. Staff should be informed about managing problems associated with medium- and long-haul flights, including immobility, deep vein thrombosis, reduced humidity and disturbance of circadian rhythms affecting metabolism and sleep patterns ("jet lag").

Maintaining and managing health and safety while abroad involves a number of considerations, including managing risks associated with planned and unplanned work activities, carrying of equipment, working in differing conditions, environmental factors (ie sun, heat, cold and altitude), infectious diseases, food and water, insect stings and animal bites, airborne diseases (such as influenza and SARS), personal safety, security, working and local conditions.

Dealing with ill health, injury or other emergencies is needed as, despite forward planning and precautions, some travellers will experience health and safety problems. Travellers should be equipped to deal with those that are minor, self-limiting and easily remedied (eg travel sickness, sunburn, prickly heat, cuts, abrasions), with arrangements to deal with more serious or significant issues, including insurance and, for some trips, carrying emergency medical and dental kits.

Return from travel should also be taken into account as actions may be necessary on return or in the weeks afterwards, eg completing a course of anti-malarial tablets and a health/medical examination to review pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes or heart problems, where ill health is experienced, or where the traveller was exposed to a serious infectious disease while travelling and medical treatment was received in another country.

Further information

- Foreign and Commonwealth Office: www.fco.gov.uk.

- NHS Health at Work: access for businesses: www.nhshealthatwork.co.uk.
- World Health Organization: information on international travel health: www.who.int/ith.

Last updated on 15/08/2012

© Wolters Kluwer (UK) Limited. This article was correct at the date of publication. It is intended as an aid and cannot be expected to replace specific professional advice and judgment. No liability for errors or omissions will be accepted. It is the responsibility of those using the information to ensure it complies with the law at the time of use and that it is used in line with relevant rules and regulations governing the subject matter in question.