



RCSI SURGERY ABROAD INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

ADVICE FOR PATIENTS

Surgery carries risks. Travelling abroad for an operation carries an even higher degree of risk than usual

Surgery is a significant life event for most people. Surgery always carries some risk. Travelling abroad for an operation (“medical tourism”) may add additional risk and you should ensure that you are fully informed before travelling abroad for surgery that is normally available in Ireland. This information leaflet will guide you as to what you should consider in making your decision.

Undergoing surgery is about more than just having a procedure. Careful planning and preparation are required to get the best results. Normally, you will be referred by your GP or other treating physician to a consultant surgeon who will evaluate your condition, decide whether an operation is likely to help you and will explain the possible risks and benefits of an operation as well as any alternatives that should be considered. Your surgeon will also discuss any aftercare that is required to ensure the best possible outcome and to safely manage any complications that arise.

Patients undergoing surgery in Ireland can expect to be treated by a specialist team led by consultant surgeons and anaesthetists who are on the Specialist Register of the Irish Medical Council. This indicates that they have completed a comprehensive specialist training programme or that the Medical Council has assessed their experience and training as equivalent. Surgeons must maintain their professional competence annually to remain on this Register and are required by Irish law to be fully covered by a medical indemnity scheme.

Surgeons understand – and share – the frustration experienced by patients who face long delays in accessing hospital beds for surgery. RCSI continues to advocate on behalf of our patients and work with the HSE to improve access to surgical services in Ireland.

There has been a marked increase in the number of people choosing to travel abroad for surgery and surgeons across Ireland have begun to see increasing numbers of patients admitted through emergency departments with complications of such surgery undertaken abroad. ‘Medical tourism’ is recognised to carry particular additional risks. You should not assume that the normal safeguards that apply to surgery and surgical procedures undertaken in Ireland are automatically in place in other countries.

If you are considering travelling abroad, there are some specific factors that you should bear in mind to safeguard your health:

1. You should always discuss your decision to travel abroad for surgery or other medical treatment with your general practitioner. You may require prior approval from the HSE for treatment under the Cross Border Directive.

2. You should ensure that you are fit to travel/fly before and in particular, after surgery.
3. You may need to bring someone with you to assist you once you leave hospital.
4. You should also ensure you understand the risks of surgery in the context of any underlying health conditions you may suffer from as some conditions may increase the risk of complications after surgery.
5. Air travel, especially in the days and weeks, after surgery, increases your risk of developing “blood clots” such as Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) in the leg and/ or Pulmonary Embolus (PE) in your lungs. This is particularly concerning following lower limb surgery (eg: Hip or Knee replacement surgery) and can even lead to life-threatening complications. For instance, The Irish Institute of Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery (IITOS) members recommend that patients not travel by air (from Ireland) for a period of four to six weeks following hip or knee replacement surgery. This risk of blood clots is also increased further by certain medical conditions, older age, dehydration and by some common medications, such as the oral contraceptive pill.
6. Most operations require follow-up care to monitor outcomes from surgery, occasionally even lifelong follow up as in the case of hip and knee replacement surgery. You should ensure there is a robust follow up plan in place and that a detailed record written of the procedure and your aftercare will be provided to you by your treating doctor abroad. In particular, you should understand what arrangements your surgeon has made to safely manage any complications of surgery that might arise after your operation or after your return home to Ireland.
7. It is important to understand your rights and protections in the country where the operation is taking place as, if medical negligence or a medical error occurs, the processes may be different than would be the case in Ireland.
8. You should ensure your doctor is appropriately qualified to perform the surgery and to deal with problems that might arise afterwards.
9. You should ensure that the hospital performing your operation has staff and equipment to deal with problems that can arise during a general anaesthetic and surgery itself.
10. You should check if the hospital where your operation is taking place is accredited by the Joint Commission International (JCI) or other recognised accrediting body that that inspects and accredits hospital standards.
11. Be aware that the risk of healthcare acquired infection and antibiotic resistant bacteria (“superbugs”) varies between countries. Acquiring an antibiotic resistant organism especially when the surgery includes implantation of a medical device (eg: Hip / Knee replacement) can have devastating life-long effects on the outcome of the procedure, regardless of which country it occurs in, but may create unique challenges for you if it were to occur abroad.
12. You should have plans for who will care for you after discharge from hospital as well as where you will stay until you are well enough and it is safe to travel home.

Additional Information

- **Citizen’s information service.** Travelling from Ireland for healthcare in Europe.
https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/health/eu_healthcare/travelling_for_healthcare.html ✎
- **HSE.** Treatment Abroad Scheme.
<https://www2.hse.ie/services/schemes-allowances/treatment-abroad/about/> ✎
- **Irish Dental Association.** Dental tourism.
<https://www.dentist.ie/your-oral-health/dental-tourism.6558.html> ✎