

What is medical tourism?

Travel outside of the United States for Medical Care

Medical tourism is the practice of traveling outside of your country of residence to seek medical care. While this practice is less common in the US, some people leave the US to seek medical care for a variety of reasons including cost savings, cultural preferences and family support. While there are potential benefits to medical tourism for some, there are potential downsides depending on the treatment sought and the country to which you travel.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tightly regulates the production of joint replacement implants and pharmaceuticals within the US to minimize the risk of injury from counterfeit medications or joint replacement parts that are manufactured in an unsafe manner. This is not the case in developing countries where regulations on the medical industry can be lax or nonexistent.

The other major concern with traveling abroad for your joint replacement if you are a US resident is the potential for a problem after surgery. If you undergo a joint replacement in another country and then return to the US and develop a problem, you either must return to your surgeon in the other country or seek care in your community. This is a difficult situation for you and the local surgeon who is now being asked to take responsibility for a surgery they did not perform.

If you are a US resident, we recommend remaining in the US for your joint replacement due to these concerns.

Travel within the United States for Medical Care

Travel within the US to have your joint replaced is a more common practice than travel abroad and has potential advantages compared to seeking care locally. Some people prefer to travel within the US to seek out the care of a specific surgeon in another city or state who has a known reputation for joint replacement or has provided high quality results to friends or family. There are other reasons people travel for joint replacement surgery:

- There may be a specific procedure that is best suited for you but is only performed by a small, select group of surgeons.
- You may need to travel to another city or region where you have family support to assist with your recovery.
- You may be in a rural area that is hours away from your closest orthopaedic surgeon, and travel becomes a necessity for care.

Despite potential advantages to traveling for joint replacement, there are also potential drawbacks. If you have a problem immediately after surgery, you may be unable to travel back to your home as you receive further treatment in your surgery destination. It also creates an issue if you develop a problem after surgery once you return home. This creates an awkward situation of either seeking care from a local surgeon who did not perform your surgery or attempting to return to the surgeon who did perform your surgery – which would require further travel.

We recommend seeking care in your community or in a well-known center close to your community. If you choose to travel for your joint replacement, we strongly recommend discussing with your surgeon how a problem would be managed after surgery.

Other Resources

- A list of qualified joint replacement surgeons can be found in the AAHKS Find a Doctor directory.
- Further information regarding medical tourism can be found on the Centers for Disease control website.
- Article regarding medical tourism for joint replacement with an example of what problems can arise in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

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This article has been written and peer reviewed by the AAHKS Patient and Public Relations Committee and the AAHKS Evidence Based Medicine Committee. Links to these pages or content used from the articles must be given proper citation to the American Association of Hip and Knee Surgeons.