

# Planning for Health Care Needs Before Traveling

November 2021

[www.healthyagingpoll.org](http://www.healthyagingpoll.org)

Many older adults travel to explore new places or visit loved ones. However, travel can present unique health related challenges, especially when trips are far from home or involve being away for an extended period. In August 2021, the National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50–80 about their travel in the past year, intentions for future travel, and the steps they take to address health care needs before and during travel.

## Travel in the past year

In the past year, 17% of adults age 50–80 said they traveled more than 100 miles from home for at least two weeks (referred to as extended trips or travel in this report), with 14% staying for 2–4 weeks and 4% staying for a month or longer.

Among older adults who took extended trips in the past year, 93% said they made sure they had enough prescription medication for their entire trip, and 80% made sure they had enough medical supplies before traveling. One in five (20%) checked beforehand what their health insurance covered in the area they were traveling to, 18% reported seeing their primary care provider before the trip, 13% identified a doctor or clinic in the area they were traveling to, and 6% purchased additional health insurance before traveling. Among adults age 50–80 who went on an extended trip, 10% said they got medical care while traveling.

## Future travel plans

One in four older adults (26%) said they planned to travel over the upcoming holiday period (November 2021–January 2022). As of August 2021, nearly one in three (31%) reported plans for extended trips in

## Preparing for health care needs before traveling AMONG ADULTS AGE 50–80 PLANNING AN EXTENDED TRIP\*

**97%**

ensure enough prescription medication

**88%**

ensure enough medical supplies

**34%**

visit primary care provider

**30%**

check what health insurance covers in area

**14%**

identify doctor or clinic in area

**11%**

purchase additional health insurance

\*Travel >100 miles from home for 2 weeks or longer in the next year.

the next year; 27% said they planned to stay for 2–4 weeks, and 4% planned to stay a month or longer.

Among those planning extended trips in the next year, 75% said they were traveling outside their home state but within the U.S., 33% outside the U.S., and 19% within their state. Two in three (67%) said they would travel by car, and 61% said they would travel by plane.

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To prepare for extended travel in the next year, most older adults said they will ensure they have enough prescription medication (97%) and medical supplies (88%). One in three (34%) planned to visit their primary care provider before traveling, and 30% said they will check to see what their health insurance covers in the area they plan to travel. Fewer older adults planned to identify a doctor or clinic in the area they plan to travel to (14%) or purchase additional health insurance coverage (11%).

If those planning extended trips should need medical care while traveling, 47% reported they would seek care at a local urgent care clinic, 41% at a local hospital emergency room, 32% would go to a local clinic or doctor, and 25% would seek care through their regular doctor via telehealth, while 5% said they would not seek care while traveling.

Among those planning extended trips, 20% said a spike in COVID-19 cases in the area they planned to visit would definitely lead them to change their travel plans, 52% said they may change plans, and 28% said increased cases would not affect their travel plans. Those who reported being vaccinated against COVID-19 (82%) were more likely than those who were unvaccinated (18%) to say that a spike in COVID cases in the area they planned to travel to may affect or would definitely affect their travel plans (77% vs 49%).

## Implications

In the past year, fewer than one in five adults age 50–80 traveled more than 100 miles from their home for two or more weeks and one in ten got medical care while traveling. In the coming year, more have extended trips planned: nearly one in three older adults are planning long term travel, with the majority expecting to travel outside their home state (but within the U.S.), and one in three planning to travel outside the country. In addition, one in four older adults said they planned to travel over the upcoming holidays.

About seven in ten adults age 50–80 said that a spike in COVID cases where they plan to travel may impact their travel plans, while more than one in four (and one in two among those not yet vaccinated) plan to keep their travel plans even if there is an increase in cases in the area they plan to visit.

Ensuring that travel, and especially extended travel, is safe and enjoyable for older adults requires advance preparation for known health care needs and having a plan should unexpected needs arise while away. Packing enough prescription medication and medical supplies, getting recommended vaccines, setting up a patient portal, and communicating with health care providers at least a month before traveling are all steps that can help save time, money, and worry.

## Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by NORC at the University of Chicago for the University of Michigan's Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. National Poll on Healthy Aging surveys are conducted using NORC's AmeriSpeak probability-based panel. This survey module was administered online and via phone in August 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of U.S. adults age 50–80 (n=2,110). The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the U.S. Census Bureau. The completion rate was 64% among panel members contacted to participate. The margin of error is ±1 to 3 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample and higher among subgroups.

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