Workers' Comp

Ask The Pharmacist: Traveling With a Controlled Substance Prescription Medication

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Are there rules or recommendations for traveling with a controlled substance?

If a patient is traveling with a controlled substance prescription medication, it is best to only bring as much medication as will be required for the time away from home. For example, if a patient has a prescription for Vicodin® (hydrocodone/APAP, a Schedule II controlled substance) that is intended to be taken as one tablet twice a day with a bottle of 60 tablets (a 30-day supply), it would be wise to bring only 14 of the 60 tablets on a seven-day trip (with a few extra tablets as a precaution). This way, if the medication is lost or stolen, the patient will not be left without any medication for the remainder of the month and may potentially have less of an issue getting a replacement or early refill. Controlled substances, unlike non-controlled medications, have tighter restrictions for the prescriber and often will not be dispensed by the pharmacy again prior to the time they should run out according to the prescription.

When traveling, it is best to keep the medication in the original prescription bottle or to put the reduced amount into a separate bottle with the same labeling. A second empty bottle with a duplicate prescription label can usually be requested at the pharmacy for this purpose. Alternatively, a copy of the prescription or a note from the prescriber may also be required in certain situations.

If traveling by plane, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) does not currently require medications be in a prescription bottle; however, states have individual laws regarding the labeling of medications that the patient should be aware of before traveling. The TSA screens medications and asks that meds be separated from other belongings for this purpose. To facilitate the screening process, it is good practice to ensure that both the patient and the medication are clearly identifiable on the container to avoid confusion.

If traveling out of the country, the patient should consider that medications may have different approvals and indications with which he or she may need to comply. This is true in the United States as well. For example,

medical marijuana laws vary greatly state to state, and medical marijuana is not currently recognized federally as a legal substance. The patient should familiarize himself or herself with the laws applicable to the area to which he or she is traveling. The TSA and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have additional information regarding medications and travel that may be found online by visiting their websites.

If possible, medication should always be kept with the patient, or alternatively, in a locked or secure location such as a hotel room safe. If a patient finds that his or her medication is misplaced or stolen, it is important to report it immediately to the prescriber. Depending on the situation, it may also be appropriate to notify law enforcement as theft of a controlled substance is a punishable offense.

This information is meant to serve as a general overview, and any specific questions or concerns should be more fully reviewed with your health care professional such as the prescribing doctor or dispensing pharmacist.

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References:

TSA: Special Procedures: Disabilities and Medical Conditions

US Customs and Border Protection: Travel

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