

Snowbird Migration

10

Things to Know about Protecting your Health and Wealth



If you're a snowbird, planning for a medical emergency should be up there with packing.

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Deanna and Hilton, both in their 70s, have been snowbirds for the past decade. Even before they retired, they loved to travel the world. Once they decided to pack it in at work, they knew that they wanted to spend the long Canadian winters basking in the warmth of the southern U.S. sun.

But a few years ago, while enjoying their time in Florida, Hilton started having double-vision and his eyelids were drooping. “I knew something was wrong, so I got to an emergency room right away,” says Hilton. After an angiogram, MRI and a CT scan confirmed an arterial blockage in his head, Hilton underwent emergency surgery.

“Doctors said getting him home to Canadian soil would be impossible,” recalls Deanna. “The pressure in his eye was so bad, that the doctor discouraged flying.” That meant that Hilton would have to have surgery in Florida. The couple knew that the medical bills would be exorbitant but breathed a sigh of relief knowing that they had purchased a travel medical policy that would cover this type of situation.

They were right. The medical bills came in at half a million dollars. Hilton says thankfully, “because we thought ahead and purchased travel insurance, we paid nothing out of pocket. That kind of bill would have been financially devastating otherwise.”

Hilton and Deanna’s story is strong proof that packing shouldn’t be the only thing on your snowbird to-do list. For snowbirds, planning for a healthcare emergency shouldn’t be left out in the cold.

1. Don’t Count on Canadian Health Care

Your Canadian government health insurance plan, when you are outside of the country, may cover less than you think; and when it comes to emergency medical treatment, provincial healthcare may pay only minimal amounts -- and at the same rates as they would pay for services in your home province. “It might cover a few hundred dollars

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when the actual costs could be in the thousands,” says Anna Kavanagh, Vice-President of TD Insurance. Just to put that into perspective—treating a broken leg in the U.S. can cost about \$3500 USDⁱ, whereas a provincial plan may pay \$50 for an outpatient hospital visitⁱⁱ.

2. Get Insured

The costs of medical care while outside of Canada can add up, even for small incidents. Depending on the policy, insurance can cover everything from prescription medication to hospital care. Travel insurance for long trips can get pricey, so shop around. “What you really need to look for is the duration of coverage to match the duration of your trip,” says Kavanagh. “You want to ensure that you are covered for the full duration you’re away.” Deanna and Hilton both have coverage through their former employers for being out of the province for two months at a time. They make sure they top up their winter stay in Florida with coverage that kicks in after their employer’s coverage ends—making it cost efficient. Ensure you bring all those policy documents with you when you cross the border, as well as proof of when you left Canada—like a boarding pass, or even a receipt from the border duty-free store.

3. Cover It All

A policy that covers you for \$1,000,000 may seem high, but if it’s not cost prohibitive, consider buying as much coverage as you can. An annual policy, which would be effective for a year, may be less expensive than a policy that covers you for a single trip. “You can buy an annual plan and that will not only cover you for your winter trip, but also a summer vacation,” relays Kavanagh. “It will protect you year after year, if you choose to renew.” Some annual plans limit the number of days you are covered while out of the country, so if you need to top up the number of days on your annual plan for an extended trip, be sure to contact your insurance company before you leave.

4. Disclose Everything

When it comes to insurance, honesty is the only policy. Even though it might cost more to purchase insurance if you disclose previous or existing health issues, it will minimize the risk of your insurer denying your claims. “If you spend the time to purchase a travel policy, you want to know you’re covered,” says Kavanagh. Disclose any and all conditions, injuries or symptoms that had given rise to any form of treatment or medication in the

Health Checklist for Snowbirds

90 Days Before Travelling:

- Get a check-up from a family physician, optometrist, and dentist to ensure all concerns are addressed before travelling.
- Obtain an extra copy of prescriptions
- Ensure provincial health card is renewed if it will expire while you are travelling

30 Days Before Travelling

- Shop for health insurance quotes and purchase an appropriate policy based on your health status
- Ensure power of attorney and will is up to date here and in the state or country where you will be travelling
- Source and make a list of emergency numbers, nearby health services and hospitals
- Obtain vacation supply of prescription medications

Just Before you Leave:

- Disclose any recent medical issues or concerns to your insurer.
- Pack emergency numbers
- Pack travel health documents
- Pack extra copy of prescription

While Travelling:

- Keep receipts for health-related expenses while travelling

When you Return:

- Remember to include health-related expenses when preparing your tax return.
- Visit your doctor for a routine follow-up checkup when you return to Canada. If there is a change in your medication, this will allow time to be "stable" on your new medication or revised dosage before you apply for travel insurance for the next season.



two years before taking out a travel medical insurance policy. Kavanagh also advises you tell the insurer if you will be doing anything adventurous on your trip, like bungee jumping or mountain climbing, as some insurers will not cover what they consider hazardous.

5. Not Going to the US?

Many snowbirds are heading to Mexico or other sunny spots outside North America. Even though the cost of getting medical treatments may be relatively inexpensive in some countries, a travel medical insurance policy may still be a good idea. A visit to the doctor might only cost \$35 in some countries, but it could cost \$50,000 or more if you need to be airlifted back home.

6. Know Before You Go

Wherever you go, do a little research ahead of time to identify services that you might need in an emergency. Locate a nearby clinic, hospital and know what to dial. 911 will access help in the U.S. But in Mexico or elsewhere the emergency number may be different.

7. B.Y.O.P. (Bring Your Own Prescriptions)

If you have prescription medications, some provinces will allow you to obtain a 200-day supply of medication for travel purposes. "I would advise travelers to bring enough medication to last the duration of the trip," says Kavanagh. "Sometimes, outside of Canada, dosages may be different or certain medications

may not be available." Always bring a copy of your prescriptions with you. If you do need to fill a prescription at a U.S. pharmacy, you'll need a local doctor to write the prescription, but you'll know what you need. For ease of customs clearance, have your medication close at hand, and in clearly labelled containers.

8. The Power of Powers of Attorney

A power of attorney is essential to allow someone else to make decisions on the medical care you need. While out of country, it is important to have your powers of attorney up-to-date. Additionally, you may consider executing the powers of attorney in the state where you will be staying to ensure that

they will be recognized.

9. Good Things Shouldn't Come To An End—Especially Health Care

Different provinces have different rules for how long you can be out of the province before you lose your government health insurance benefits. If you are out of province for a prolonged period, you may have to reinstate your benefits by living in your province for a pre-determined period of time. Make sure you know the rules and are able to

prove you have fulfilled your residency requirements.

10. Writing It Off

Come tax time, health insurance, including out-of-province travel medical insurance premiums, may be eligible as part of the medical tax credit—a nice perk. You can include the premiums for extended health and dental programs up to a limit based on a ceiling or a percentage of income—whichever is less. Ask your insurer for a receipt stating the cost of your medical coverage (excluding any trip cancellation or lost baggage coverage). Medical expenses

you incurred outside of the country may also be eligible.

Bottom Line

Since even a small accident can mean a significant medical bill in the U.S., Deanna always makes sure she and her husband are insured, even if just going cross-border shopping for a day. “We leave our insurance information with family members, keep our own copies with us, and carry family phone numbers with us wherever we go,” says Deanna, “better safe than sorry.”

- *Written by Denise O'Connell, Money Talk Life*

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ASPE ISSUE BRIEF. Common Sports Injuries: Incidence and Average Charges. Arpit Misra.

ⁱⁱ Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care. <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/publications/ohip/travel.aspx>

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