

Health challenges of international travel for obese patients: a qualitative study

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Background

It is unknown whether obesity is a barrier to international travel. The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the travel experiences of a cohort of obese individuals in the west of Ireland, to identify perceived barriers to travel, and to generate recommendations which address the needs of obese individuals.

Materials and methods

Following research ethics committee approval, semi-structured interviews were conducted with obese participants attending a local, structured, multidisciplinary weight management programme. A thematic analysis was performed based on examination of the interview transcripts. Demographic and clinical data such as gender, age and body mass index were also recorded.

Results

Twelve volunteers (6 male, 6 female; body mass index 34.3-58.5 kg/m²) agreed to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews (14-52 minutes duration) were recorded and transcribed. Coding and thematic analysis by three independent researchers were completed. The principal themes emerging from the interviews include obese air traveller embarrassment; physical discomfort on commercial flights; perceived weight bias; challenges in accessing hotel rooms; heat stress in hot climates; restricted leisure travel activities; and medical co-morbidities. Most of the interviewees appreciated the health benefits of travel but regarded obesity as a significant barrier to international travel.

Conclusions

The findings of this novel study highlight the unique limitations experienced by obese travellers when engaging in travel overseas. Our results may inform the pre-travel health advice given to obese travellers and have a positive effect on the approach taken by travel destinations and the travel industry.