Medical Treatment in South Korea

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IMPORTANT: if you require urgent medical assistance in South Korea dial 119 or 1339.
An Overview of Medical Treatment in South Korea

Medical facilities are generally very good, and the cost of treatment is reasonable when compared to the West or developed countries. In fact, South Korea has recently seen an increasing number of foreigners visit solely for the purpose of receiving medical treatment/surgery here. The equivalent of the National Health Service (NHS) in Korea is said to be the Korean [National Health Insurance Service (국민건강보험)](https://knhi.re.kr/). You should speak to your local employer to clarify your entitlements. The larger city hospitals tend to be better equipped, although staff are generally well-trained in hospitals and clinics alike. There are very few British doctors practicing in South Korea; only a very small percentage of Korean doctors/surgeons and nursing staff speak English, though some in the bigger hospitals may speak some English.

Large general hospitals and hospitals affiliated to universities will have most medical/surgical departments though patients may have to wait to be seen. Furthermore, without a referral from a doctor (at a smaller hospital/clinic), the costs of treatment may be higher than normal. The following is an example of departments found at a university hospital in South Korea:

- Anesthesia & Pain Medicine
- Cardiology
- Dental Clinic
- Dermatology
- Emergency Medicine
- Family Medicine
- Gastroenterology
- Infectious Diseases
- Nephrology
- Neurology
- Neurosurgery
- Obstetrics & Gynecology
- Ophthalmology
- Orthopedic Surgery
- Pathology
- Pediatrics
- Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
- Psychiatry
- Radiology
- Rehabilitation Medicine
- Urology

Language Assistance

English-speaking doctors and nurses may be available in the larger hospitals within Seoul, but the general assumption should be that a Korean doctor/nurse will not be able to communicate in English. Nevertheless, many larger university hospitals now have dedicated staff interpreters (on standby) who can assist you in dealings with medical/administrative staff as well as communicating with the doctor/nurse (upon request). In Korea, foreigners may also call/dial 1330 (i.e. Korea Travel Hotline Tel. 1330), a 24/7 interpretation service provided by the Korean government. Finally, please see our list of local providers (regularly updated) [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/south-korea-list-of-lawyers](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/south-korea-list-of-lawyers) for more information. Also, please refer to our list of hospitals (regularly updated): [https://www.gov.uk/guidance/living-in-south-korea](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/living-in-south-korea) (See ‘Hospital List in South Korea’ under ‘Health.’)

Medicine

If you are on prescription medication, make sure you either bring enough with you or have access to a supply once in South Korea. Certain medicines may not be available in South Korea. South Korean Customs authorities allow you to bring small amounts of medication for your personal use if you are on medication, provided that it is kept in carry-on baggage. It is advised to take an English language prescription from your doctor at home for both your prescription drugs and non-prescription medicines. That way, you avoid problems or misunderstandings at customs in South Korea. It is also a good idea to consult their Website before you travel to South Korea.

Emergency Medical Treatment

Many larger hospitals have emergency departments that operate around the clock. If you require emergency medical treatment and you cannot get to your nearest hospital you should call 119 and ask for an ambulance. There may be some delay in transporting you to hospital sometimes due to heavy traffic congestion especially in and around Seoul.
In Korea, ERs of large-scale university hospitals tend to be overcrowded, and they generally focus on treating patients with major injuries. For these reasons, patients with minor injuries are likely to wait for a long period of time to receive medical services in ER of large-scale university hospitals.

**Medical Treatment During Evenings and Public Holidays**

Medical institutions are usually closed on Sundays, public holidays (including Lunar New Year’s, Chuseok) and the end and the beginning of the year. Most hospitals and clinics are also closed on Saturday afternoons. Most large hospitals offer emergency treatment on a 24/7 basis but not all; where possible, you should check in advance, or in a real emergency call 119 for an ambulance.

**Privacy**

Privacy is secured for patients in South Korea. Medical consultation takes place in a doctor’s room. (FYI: When compared to the UK, the actual duration of consultation tends to be very short in Korea.) Patients may receive less privacy in an emergency medical room/setting.

**Being Admitted to Hospital in South Korea**

Hospitals in South Korea provide round the clock nursing care, most wards are smaller than in the UK. Food is provided as are all your medications, though the cost of these will be added to your bill. Food is based on a Korean diet, and you should consult your doctor before buying your own food. Allergies and religious requirements are taken into consideration, but you will have to make a separate request. You may have to purchase your own bottled water if you do not wish to drink water from the tap or water dispenser. You will be allowed visitors unless you are in critical condition; nursing staff will be able to advise you on visiting times/restrictions. It is unlikely that Wi-Fi will be available at the ward.

You should follow the instructions of the hospital administration staff when being admitted. In general, paperwork will need to be provided, such as an application form, agreement, health insurance card, etc. In case of an emergency admission, a representative will be able to submit the required paperwork on your behalf. A deposit may be required, although the larger hospitals ask for payment after rendering emergency assistance/care (and before moving to a ward). Even in emergency situations, some hospitals do ask for payment in advance especially when a CT/MRI scan is required. Even during emergency admissions, it is recommended you or your representative bring along a credit card.

Typical flow chart for non-emergency out-patients:
Reservation → Registration → Payment → Consultation → Payment → Examination & Treatment → Follow-up.

**Private Rooms**

Many hospitals have private rooms (single occupancy rooms) which offer greater privacy for patients willing to pay for them. Fees for private rooms are considerably higher than for shared wards (e.g. 6-8 patients). Hospital staff may assume that foreign patients require a private room for their stay in hospital without first consulting them. You should make it clear from the very beginning if you do not wish to be placed in a private room. If you do, you should first check with your insurer whether this additional cost will be covered under your policy.

**Payment & Insurance**
You will be expected to pay the whole cost of any treatment you receive. There have been cases where treatment has been delayed whilst medical facilities check a patient's insurance is valid for the recommended course of treatment. When travelling in South Korea make sure you have comprehensive insurance covering all planned activities, healthcare, and medical evacuation/repatriation to the UK or your normal country of residence for the duration of your stay. Please see our guidance on Foreign Travel Insurance, which outlines what your insurance policy should cover you for.

Residents in South Korea will be required to enroll in either Employee or National Health Insurance Service to qualify for reduced rates of medical treatment. Note: These reduced rates apply to most, but not all, types of medical services/surgeries.

**Deposits**

You may be required to make a deposit when admitted to a hospital for treatment. The amount can vary depending on the hospital and/or treatment involved. Any deposits made will be deducted from your final bill so you should ensure you keep all receipts.

**How we can help you if you are in hospital**

- We aim to contact you as soon as possible after being told that you have been admitted to hospital to assess how we can help you. We will then help you according to your individual needs. This may include visiting you if you are particularly vulnerable and you want us to.

- When we assess your vulnerability, we will take account of factors such as your condition, your ability to speak on the phone, whether you have relatives or friends with you, whether you have a tour company representative and the standard of medical facilities. We will then decide whether a visit is appropriate or not. If we believe it is, and we are able to get to you, we will aim to visit as soon as possible.

- If you want, we can contact your family or friends in the UK to tell them that you are in hospital.

- If you want, we can help you to consult your insurance company or medical evacuation company. Remember to keep any receipts or doctors’ notes in case you need them to make a claim. We may also be able to help you communicate with hospital staff in certain situations if they do not speak English.

- We do not usually contact or visit people who have travelled specifically for medical treatment and we cannot pay medical bills.

- We do not get you better treatment in hospital that is given to local people.

- We do not act as an interpreter (or translator) between you and hospital.
Useful Links

If you need general advice when travelling abroad or want to know how the Embassy can help you or if you have difficulties please see Support for British Nationals: A Guide. We also publish and regularly update Foreign Travel Advice with key information for 225 countries and territories around the world.

Support for British Nationals: A Guide

Foreign Travel Advice
https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

South Korea: Local Providers List
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/south-korea-list-of-lawyers

Living in South Korea
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/living-in-south-korea

Foreign Travel Insurance
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/foreign-travel-insurance

South Korean Embassy in the UK

South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare
http://www.mohw.go.kr/eng/index.jsp

Psychiatric Services (offered in English) within South Korea
https://ahskorea.com ; https://www.thetreeg.com ; www.psychotherapy.co.kr

(Korean) Health Insurance Review & Assessment Service
http://www.hira.or.kr/eng/main.do

‘Find a Hospital/Pharmacy Near You’ Webpage (run by HIRA)
http://www.hira.or.kr/rd/hosp/getHospList.do?pgmid=HIRAA030002000000

KCDC Website
http://www.cdc.go.kr/CDC/eng/main.jsp

(Korean) National Emergency Medical Centre Website
http://www.e-gen.or.kr/english/main.do

Foreign Residents Advisory Website in South Korea
http://www.korea4expats.com/article-emergency-services-medical-info.html

Bestseller Book: List of The Best Doctors in South Korea (‘대한민국 베스트 닥터’)  