When someone needs medical care and transport over a long distance, a choice between a ground or air ambulance may be necessary for the transfer. Because transporting a patient for medical care involves much more than putting someone on a stretcher and going, several factors must be considered when arranging for transport, particularly when there is a great distance to cover.

Ground ambulances are those that most people think of when they hear the word “ambulance.” They are the trucks or vans used for transport of patients by driving from one place to another. Ground ambulances can be used for shorter transports that take place within cities, whether for emergent or non-emergency purposes. They are also available to drive long distances and may go between cities, states or provinces, but they will need to stop and refuel. In a case in which a ground ambulance must travel a great distance, the patient is usually receiving a non-emergency transport.

For some situations, a ground ambulance may not be the best choice for transport. This may be due to the patient’s condition and necessity for prompt medical care or other factors, such as time, road conditions, and the nearest facility. In these cases, transport through an air ambulance may be the best choice for everyone involved. An air ambulance uses an aircraft such as a helicopter or fixed-wing plane to transport patients over long distances. These types of aircraft have all of the supplies necessary to stabilize the patient and to provide medical
support during the transfer. The time it takes to cover long distances for medical transport is greatly reduced when using an air ambulance as compared with a ground ambulance.

Long-distance transports may be necessary in some locations, although a rural site is not the only reason for this type of transfer. For accidents and injuries that occur in remote areas, the nearest hospital or healthcare center may be far away, requiring long-distance travel for any type of ambulance in order to move a patient. Some patients live in cities where there may be one or several hospitals, but may need specialty services that require transfer to another location that could be hours away. An example of this might be someone who needs an organ transplant through a procedure that is not performed at any local hospitals.

Traveling over great distances to receive medical care can be difficult, especially in critical situations. Before being transferred, a patient must be stabilized for transport to begin with. This is a critical aspect of transport, because if a patient’s health is unstable before transfer, he may not survive the long trip. However, in some situations, such as a serious accident, a patient may be moved and the work of stabilization may continue while in route to the hospital. This makes providing medical care difficult for the paramedics involved, as they must attempt to care for a critically ill patient while managing travel at the same time. Additionally, traveling long distances means longer periods of time that it takes to get a patient to a healthcare center, thereby lengthening the time until he receives surgery or other important services.

Depending on the need for ambulance services, ground or air transport may be viable options. When arranging for services, factors such as the patient’s circumstances, weather conditions, and availability of staff are all considered to provide the best services that will care for the patient during this critical time of need.
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