

Special Health Matters

Disability and Air Travel

♥ Is it difficult to travel with the airlines if you have a disability?

Flying with a disability need not create any hindrance to your journey. Many automatically assume that just because a person has a disability it will inevitably restrict their opportunity to travel around the world. This need not be the case. True, flying with a disability is slightly more complicated than for a flier without disability. Nevertheless, the majority of all airlines are now geared towards catering for disabled fliers.

♥ Plan Ahead

Advanced planning is always essential. Planning a trip is always a hectic time, with so many things to organize at once, it is easy to forget something. Be sure while planning your vacation that you also take a look at some of the things that might make the trip more enjoyable. Why are you taking the trip? Does it meet the needs of everyone involved? Consult your doctor about:

- **Your need for immunizations**
- **To ensure that you have all the prescriptions you will need for the duration of your trip (and some spare for emergencies)**
- **All the medical equipment you might need, and any spare parts you might need in an emergency.**
- **Recommendations for any non-prescription medications you might need such as pain killers, sun lotion, laxatives, spare glasses etc.**
- **How to get medical assistance when you are away. Contact addresses for nearby hospitals etc., emergency telephone numbers and quality of health care in the country you are visiting.**
- **If you have a shunt or certain neuro conditions, ask your neurosurgeon if it would be good for you to carry a cd or flash-drive with one of your baseline CT scans, this would enable other physicians to see your baseline.**

Consult your travel agent about:

- **What special assistance you can expect from the hotel, tour group, transportation company etc. you intend to use while you are way.**
- **What sort of accommodations will be needed throughout your trip, be it, car rental or organizing seating on planes, coaches, cruises etc.**
- **Whether any special dietary needs will be sufficiently met at hotels/restaurants at your chosen destination.**
- **Whether the hotel you intend to stay at has toilets suited to disabled travelers.**
- **Try and make sure you reserve the type of car you need as soon as you know your date of arrival to prevent disappointment..**
- **You will inevitably also need to carry a placard indicating that you are disabled. You can bring your own placard if you are in the U.S., or contact your travel agent if you are leaving the country.**

♥ Equipment and Oxygen

Wheelchair users should make sure that their chair is in full working order and have a maintenance check in advance of the trip. Likewise, ensure that you have basic tools and parts for the assembly and repair of your wheelchair, in the event that something goes wrong.

As with all luggage, you should tag your chair with all your contact details, name, address, telephone number and hotel address in the unlikely event that your chair goes missing. Ideally, you should also attach a photocopy of instructions to dismantle to your chair. If your chair requires any special equipment for disassembling, discuss this with the airline in advance so that they accommodate your needs. Remember, even if you are on hand to help with dismantling your chair before departure, it is unlikely that you will be present at the other end of your flight to assist with re-assembly.

If you encounter any problems, then you should immediately speak to the 'Complaint Resolution Officer'. All airlines should have a CRO officer available 24hrs a day either by phone or in person, who is trained to deal with any problems a disabled flyer may encounter while traveling.

Prepare an instruction sheet, with illustrations, on assembly and disassembly of your medical equipment.

Bring back up suction machines and extra ventilator batteries if you are medically fragile.

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Just because you need to travel with oxygen, you need not restrict the opportunities to travel, it just takes a little bit more planning.

Travelers who require oxygen for medical use are, unfortunately, subject to a charge per bottle. This rate varies between airlines, and can be quite expensive. You will need to contact the airline at least 48hrs prior to flying to advise the flow rate, and to get full medical clearance, though this tends to be minor technicality. In the US the FAA requires a physician's statement outlining your needs for oxygen. Please note though that some airlines require 7 days notice, so we recommend that you check with your airline as soon as you know that you are flying to avoid any complications.

Charges for oxygen can vary greatly, usually between \$100 - \$200. It is interesting to note that many airlines charge not per canister, but per leg of your trip. So in a flight which involves two legs, you're going to be charged twice as much as a direct flight, despite the fact that you may be covering the same distance in the same length of time. Economically, therefore, it can work out a lot cheaper if you can organize a direct flight, though this may not always be possible.

♥ Travel Insurance

It is vital if you are traveling with a disability to take out travel insurance to cover both your flights and holiday period itself. Never assume that the quality of health care will be the same abroad. In particular, be aware that many policies sold by tour operators will not cover individuals with pre-existing medical conditions.

Importantly, make sure that your travel insurance policy covers any specialist equipment you may be traveling with i.e. your wheelchair. This should include full replacement in the event that your chair is stolen or damaged. Talk to your travel insurer directly to discuss your needs, and find a policy which provides the necessary cover.

♥ Ideas for the airport and on the airplane

- ***Always arrive early. It can take longer for a person with a disability to check in, especially if they are in a wheelchair, as it has to be inspected thoroughly.***
- ***Do not send any medications that might be needed during the trip with the checked luggage. It is better to carry all your medications with you, so if your luggage gets lost you have the essentials. Be sure to carry on plenty of diapers or incontinence garments as well.***
- ***Most airlines only have small snacks, so prepare by bringing different types of snacks for yourself. You may want to make a sandwich or something substantial as we all tend to get cranky when we are hungry. If you are fed enterally by tube, be sure to have the equipment with you available. Bring at least one carry on that can fit under the seat.***
- ***If you are visually or hearing impaired, you may want to bring written directions to take with you on the plane and for transportation. Make sure you let the attendant or driver know when you want to get off so they can inform you when it is time.***

♥ Resources

Flying with Disability <http://www.flying-with-disability.org/index.html> (source)

Utah Family Voices www.utahfamilyvoices.com (source)

Disabled travelers in the U.S. can order a free booklet from the **U.S. Department of Transportation** outlining valuable information for all disabled travelers by telephoning PVA Distribution Center at: 888-860-7244 (Order No. 2100-16).

The Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association also supply a handy booklet on how to make a complaint if you are an unsatisfied disabled traveler, along with a comprehensive guide to the Air Carriers Access Act. For full details call 718-803-EPVA, or write to 75-20 Astoria Boulevard, Jackson Heights, NY 11370-1177.