

TravAbility

Making the World Accessible to All



TIPS For Flying

Compiled by a C5/6 quad and a person with MS, both wheelchair users - experienced and frequent international travellers.

CHECK-IN

You can usually transport from a manual chair at Check-In or at the plane door. Electric chairs need to be left at Check-In to be loaded. You will be taken to your seat in a special narrow aisle chair. There you can sit on your cushion in the airline seat, just a thin silicon or foam pad may help, or just in the plane seat but beware plane seats are hard.

You'll need to take an overnight bag that your attendant/carer can connect to your leg bag to transfer contents to toilet if you fill your leg bag. If you take a brief case you may find it useful to prop your feet on it as a posture change. Try to get a "bulkhead seat" as there is more leg room.

Don't plan to need to have a bowel movement. Don't eat gassy foods before or drink fizzy drinks on the plane. Water is best and beware of dehydration so drink lots. Avoid alcohol it can dehydrate you more and you'll not be treated well if drunk.

You'll get standard treatment by flight attendants of food and drink. Use pillows under your arms to assist sleeping while sitting up. If you are in Business or First class you can sleep really easily and lay right back. In Economy you can't recline much and the seats are narrow.

Remember that just because you are disabled, you don't have special seating privileges. If you are considerate and polite to staff at check-in and boarding, you'll be treated better. Upgrades are only ever a bonus NOT an expectation – equality goes both ways. If you need to travel in business with better reclining seats, you'll have to pay the fare. Otherwise expect to sit in economy class with everyone else.

BOARDING

Your attendant/carer will need to help you change positions, prop pillows under necks etc, cut up your food. But airline staff should be the ones getting you on and off the plane with an aisle chair - **DON'T ALLOW THEM TO CARRY YOU MORE THAN TWO ROWS**. You could easily be hurt - know. International carriers have a code of conduct regarding disabled passengers that excludes carrying them more than transfer distance unless it is passenger request and only then if the passenger is extremely light (child). This is an important OH&S safety measure for both you and airline staff. All 747s have onboard aisle chairs and all airports should have suitable chairs as well. Request the chair at booking time not just as you are about to board – be considerate of staff.

There should be disabled toilets in departure area but make sure you empty your bag before you go on board - just in case. Start the flight on empty. It also makes transfers easier.

Organise to hire a commode chair - if you can (not easy, commode seats yes - wheeled chairs rare) or bring your own. Remember airlines carry wheelchairs and assistive aids free (within reason) so you could bring an electric and a manual chair for free as well as medical equipment like a commode chair. Problem is transport at both ends becomes complex the more you carry.

Pack as few clothes and non essentials as possible, avoid aerosols and ANY metal sharp things in hand luggage – they will be confiscated. Buy heavy things like shampoo/conditioner when you get where you're going, just take bottles to get you through the first few days. Every bit of weight and bulk saved makes travel easier. Remember, your carer or airline staff should not be considered pack-mules for all the carry on stuff like cushions, slide boards, luggage – be considerate. A backpack slung on the back of your chair helps you carry some of your carry on luggage.

WARNINGS

Get to the airport extra early so everything can be arranged and better seat allocations made. Allow an extra hour for an electric chair and YOU disconnect the electrics - don't leave it up to airline staff they can badly damage the chair. Some people even carry the chair joystick as carry on or in their luggage as that is the most easily damaged part. Batteries should be sealed otherwise they must be taken out of the chair and transported separately in special containers.

Carry all essentials with you like tablets, overnight drainage equipment, etc in case your luggage is lost because they are very hard to replace in a foreign land. Keep tablets in original bottles with script. Carry photocopies of your passport in your case and one in your handbag in case of loss. Get a certificate from your doctor stating you are safe to fly too if you have a severe disability. It may be a nuisance but it is better than being denied boarding.

Beware of flat wheelchair tyres when you land - the planes cargo area can explode over inflated tyres and most tyres lose a little air due to the low pressure in the hold.

DVD (deep vein thrombosis)

If, you buy a pair of support stockings from a chemist, get the short ones that only go up to under your knees and with the toes cut out. The people in the shop will measure your ankles and calves to get the right size.

There is no need for the full length ones with the toes in. Jackie got those first and they were just too uncomfortable as there is no way to keep your toes straight and still to this day (3 years later) she has little round pressure marks on some of my toes. Definitely the ones with the toes cut out are the way to go.

As much as possible, change posture and stretch your legs by having your legs raised one at a time and shifting onto a bit on each side to take weight off your sacrum. Stretch your back by leaning forward on your knees and if you fart apologise!

Try to elevate your legs as much as possible but don't take off your shoes as they increase foot stability and you may not be able to get them back on after the flight - feet swell at the lower pressure in a plane a lot.

Don't fly too many long hops without a break for your bum and your brain. Be realistic regarding your fitness and ability to stay awake too long. The stop may cost you but not as much as arriving and getting sick because you pushed yourself too much.

ONCE YOU HAVE LANDED

As a safety back-up, pack portable grab rails and a rubber mat with suction backing. Sometimes these items will enable you to safely utilise a non-accessible bathroom. <http://www.doability.com.au/Default.asp?p=PG&cri=7>

FINALLY

Remember to relax and enjoy yourself and plan for a good sleep before you leave and when you arrive. Fatigue can really stuff up a holiday so have sensible timelines for partying. Don't expect to sleep a lot on the plane as they are noisy and uncomfortable for a long trip. Don't be put off by all these warnings of doom as you'll be fine if you know your limitations and don't consider yourself able to do anything. Arriving fit only allows you to enjoy the trip and the destination and we want you to be able to do that.