

# AIR TRAVEL FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CHEST, HEART & STROKE ILLNESS

If you have any concerns about your health, such as existing medical conditions or recent illness or operations, then you need to contact the airline's medical department before travelling. This will allow medical clearance and fitness to fly to be assessed before you travel and allow the airline staff to help you with early boarding and in-flight care if required.

## Who needs medical clearance to fly?

If any of the criteria below apply you and your doctor will need to complete a Medical Information Form (MEDIF). This is available from your airline's medical department or your travel agent.

Your airline may also ask you to complete an Incapacitated Passengers Handling Advice (INCAD) form; sometimes the INCAD and MEDIF are two parts of the same form.

INCAD and MEDIF forms are only valid for one journey.

You will need medical clearance to fly if:

1. Your fitness is in doubt as a result of:
  - a recent illness
  - a period in hospital
  - surgery
  - you have an acute or chronic condition that is unstable
2. You need any special medical provision e.g. oxygen, a stretcher or medical treatment in-flight.

You may also need medical clearance to fly if:

1. You need a medical escort.
2. You are carrying any special medical equipment.

## FREMEC card

If you travel frequently you may be able to get a Frequent Traveller's Medical Card (FREMEC) issued by your airline's medical department. It contains important medical information and replaces forms that previously had to be completed for each flight.

Once you have registered, the airline's reservations office records details of your requirements so that any special assistance can be provided whenever you fly. If you plan to travel with a different airline from the one that issued your FREMEC card, you should check that they will accept it.

A FREMEC card can be particularly useful if you have chronic obstructive airway disease.

## HEAD OFFICE

65 North Castle Street, Edinburgh EH2 3LT

Tel: 0131 225 6963 Fax: 0131 220 6313 Advice Line: 0845 077 6000

E-mail: [admin@chss.org.uk](mailto:admin@chss.org.uk) Website: [www.chss.org.uk](http://www.chss.org.uk)

Scottish Charity No. SCO18761

## Planning ahead

If possible, try to think in advance about what help you may need when travelling and make any special arrangements with your airline, travel agent or tour operator. Ideally arrangements should be made when you book your flight. However, if you need assistance from airport or airline staff at any stage of your journey, you should always request this at least 48 hours before you fly.

- A medical check-up may be needed before booking your holiday.
- Arrange to take a doctor's letter with you outlining existing medical conditions and what drugs you are on.
- Ensure adequate travel insurance is in place before you travel, preferably including the cost of flying home.
- Make sure that you have sufficient supplies, of all your drugs, for your entire holiday.
- Oxygen must be requested at least 48 hours in advance and preferably at the time of booking.
- Nebulisers can be used at the airline's discretion; again you will need to inform them in advance. Remember that proper use of spacers can be just as effective.
- Transport within the airport can be provided for you, if you arrange it in advance.

## When travelling

- Try to arrive early at the airport; this gives you plenty of time to get organised and obtain seats with maximum leg room.
- Avoid handling heavy luggage.
- Keep any drugs in your hand luggage and make sure you have sufficient supplies to last your holiday. This is especially important for inhalers or GTN spray that you might need to use on the journey. Due to recent security alerts airlines may only permit small quantities of liquids in hand luggage and any bottles should be in their original containers. Please check with your airline for most up to date information.

## How do I arrange oxygen for a flight?

- If you use oxygen continuously, and will need it during the flight, you will have to let the airline know when you book your seat.
- Each airline will have its own policy regarding the supply of in-flight oxygen e.g. what flow rates are available and what charges, if any, are applicable.
- The airline will only provide an oxygen mask, so if you prefer nasal cannulae you will need to provide your own.
- Some airlines now prohibit in-flight oxygen during take off and landing so this may prevent some people from flying.
- Most airlines will only provide oxygen for the flight. If you need oxygen on the ground you will need to provide your own for any transfer between flights.

## How can I protect myself when flying?

The main problem with flying is that you may be sitting still for a long period of time. Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a blood clot which can sometimes occur as a result of long distance travel. Encouraging your circulation and avoiding dehydration will give you the best protection against the formation of a DVT.

Try and do the following:

- Make sure you have plenty of legroom when you book, this may mean checking in early.
- Every half hour: bend and stretch your legs, wiggle your feet and press the balls of your feet down hard against the floor.
- Get up regularly, if you can, for short walks.
- Wear lightweight, non-restrictive clothing when you travel.
- Avoid, or limit, alcohol and caffeine before and during the flight as these can make you dehydrated.
- Drink plenty of fluids; preferably take your own bottle of water and have regular sips throughout the journey.
- Depending on your situation, wearing graduated compression (or 'flight') stockings may help. You must continue to stretch your legs and feet if you wear stockings.

Some people have a higher risk of developing DVTs. Your doctor can help you work out what measures you may need to take prior to flying.

## Where to get help?

'Access to air travel: Guidance for disabled and less mobile passengers' is available from Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC)  
Tel: 02079448011 [www.dptac.gov.uk](http://www.dptac.gov.uk)

'Your rights to fly – step by step guide'  
available from Equality and Human Rights Commission  
Tel: 0845 604 5510 [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

Deep vein thrombosis – prevention for travellers (2009) available from NHS  
Clinical Knowledge Summaries  
Tel: 0191 243 6100 [www.cks.nhs.uk/dvt\\_prevention\\_for\\_travellers](http://www.cks.nhs.uk/dvt_prevention_for_travellers)



## When can I fly?

Whether you are fit to fly or not will depend on your individual situation. The figures in the following sections are based upon guidelines (2009) issued to medical professionals from the Aviation Health Unit (UK Civil Aviation Authority). Please note that these are minimum time figures and will not apply to everyone. Guidelines, though correct at the time of writing, may change.

If you are travelling to go on holiday it might be better to wait longer, before you fly, to ensure you have had enough recovery time to fully enjoy your holiday.

## Chest conditions

Cabin air is pressurised and contains less oxygen; however most people with chest complaints have no difficulty flying. If you can walk more than 50 metres on the flat, at your normal pace, or climb one flight of stairs without getting breathless you should be able to fly with your doctor's permission.

Remember that your sputum will become stickier in the dry plane atmosphere. Drinking plenty of non-alcoholic fluids will help loosen your sputum and allow you to keep your chest clear.

It is safe to use any of your inhalers when flying; keep them with you, in your hand luggage, at all times. You may wish to bring a supply of antibiotics and steroids with you in the event of developing a chest infection while you are abroad.

Try to remain as mobile as possible throughout the flight if you are not using oxygen.

People with cystic fibrosis should undertake physiotherapy during stopovers on a long haul flight.



### **When can I fly?**

As with other conditions this depends on your individual situation so check with your doctor before booking.

#### ***Tuberculosis***

If you have infective pulmonary TB then you must not fly or use any public transport.

#### ***Pneumothorax***

You cannot fly if you currently have a pneumothorax. However, you should be able to fly approximately 2 weeks after drainage of a pneumothorax as long as your lung has fully re-expanded. Your doctor will need to confirm this by x-ray and give you permission to fly.

#### ***Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)***

As this is a chronic chest condition that can become unstable very quickly you should have a medical assessment prior to flying.

#### ***Chest surgery***

As long as you have fully recovered, and there are no complications, then you should be allowed to fly approximately 2 weeks after chest surgery. Following major surgery you may want to wait longer to allow the chest bone and ribs to heal. Again you will need your doctor's permission to fly.

### **Heart conditions**

Generally speaking, if your heart condition is stable and you feel well then you should be able to fly. You must carry any drugs, which you have been prescribed, with you in your hand luggage. If you are at all unsure then you must check with your doctor before arranging to fly.

#### ***Angina***

If your angina is stable flying should not be a problem. It is safe to use your GTN spray in the cabin so be sure to keep it on you.

#### ***High blood pressure***

If your high blood pressure is being treated and is under control then you should be able to fly. Remember to carry any drugs, which you have been prescribed, with you in your hand luggage.

### ***Pacemakers, ICDs and metal heart valves***

The functioning of your pacemaker, internal cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) or artificial metal valve will not be affected by the airport security systems. However you should let security personnel know as they may trigger the alarms of the metal detectors and a hand search can be done instead.

#### **When can I fly?**

##### ***Heart attack***

Flying will depend on your individual recovery; the general rule about activity applies. You may be allowed to fly 2 weeks after a heart attack if there are no complications. However you must get your doctor's permission.

##### ***Heart surgery***

As long as you have fully recovered, and there are no complications, then you should be allowed to fly approximately 7-10 days after heart surgery. Following open heart surgery you may want to wait longer to allow the chest bone and ribs to heal. Again you will need your doctor's permission to fly.

##### ***Angioplasty***

Flying is usually permitted after 5 days if you are medically stable. Individual assessment is always necessary.

### **Stroke conditions**

As with other conditions mentioned, deciding to fly after having a stroke is a very individual decision to make. You need to discuss, with your doctor, any issues that may affect you and balance the risks of flying against the benefits. You will also need to consider the practical issues, insurance and airline regulations.

#### **When can I fly?**

If you have had a stroke then you are not advised to fly for at least 10 days and then only with your doctor's permission. If your stroke has left you with a disability then you may want to wait for several months before flying.

If you have had a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) then you will need to have made a complete recovery and have your doctor's permission before you can fly.

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,  
please call the Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line  
**Monday – Friday 9.30am - 12.30 and 1.30pm - 4.00pm**

**0845 077 6000**