

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

If you have any concerns about your health such as existing medical conditions or after an illness or operation you should contact the airline medical department before travelling by air. 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.

FREMEC card

If you travel frequently you might like to look into getting a Frequent traveller's medical card (FREMEC) issued by airline medical departments. It contains important medical information and replaces forms that previously had to be completed for each flight. Once a person has registered, the airline's reservations office records details of your requirements so that special assistance can be provided whenever the person flies. May be particularly useful for people with chronic obstructive airways disease.

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), which is available from the medical department of the airline or your travel agent.

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.

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Planning ahead

- A medical check up may be needed before booking your holiday.
- Take a doctors letter with you outlining existing medical conditions and medication.
- Ensure adequate medical insurance is in place before you travel preferably including the cost of flying home.
- Make sure you have adequate supplies of your medicines for the whole 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, but proper use of spacers is just as effective.
- Transport within the airport can be provided for you, if you arrange it in advance.

When travelling

- You should arrive early at the airport to give you plenty of time and to obtain seats with maximum leg room.
- Avoid handling heavy luggage.
- Keep your medicines 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.
- Flow rates of 2 and 4 litres of oxygen per minute are available on most flights; however long haul flights can only provide 4 litres per minute.
- 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 charge you for your oxygen** and 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. Encouraging your circulation and avoiding dehydration will give you the best protection against blood clots forming.

Try and do the following:

- Make sure you have plenty of legroom when you book, this may mean checking in early.
- Stretch your legs and wiggle your feet every half hour.
- Get up regularly if you can, for short walks.
- Wear light-weight, non-restrictive clothing when you travel.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine before and during the flight as this makes you dehydrated.
- Drink plenty of fluids, preferably take your own bottle of water and have regular sips.
- You might want to wear support hosiery.
- Graduated compression stockings may be helpful if you have a history of heart or stroke conditions.
- Discuss with your doctor any other measures you may need to take prior to flying.

Where to get help?

The website www.flying-with-disability is designed to provide impartial information and advice to all disabled people around the world who travel by air.

The Aviation Health Institute also has a lot of information about air travel
www.aviation-health.org.uk

‘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

Heart conditions

Generally speaking, if you can walk briskly for 100 metres on the flat without being breathless or in pain you can fly.

Angina

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

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 is based on each individual's abilities, which will depend on individual recovery. The general rule above about activity applies. You should be allowed to fly four weeks after an uncomplicated heart attack with your doctor's permission. If you are travelling to go on holiday it might be better to wait until 6 weeks to ensure you have had enough recovery time.

Heart surgery - It is advisable not to fly for at least 8-10 weeks after major heart or chest surgery to allow the sternum and ribs to heal. However many sources quote 4-6 weeks.

Angioplasty

Travel is usually permitted after 3-5 days but this needs medical clearance.

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 the variety of issues that may affect you and balance the possible and uncertain risks of flying against the benefits. Therefore you need to consider the risks, practical issues, insurance and airline regulations.

When can I fly?

If your stroke has left you with any disability you are not advised to fly for about 3 months and then with your doctor's permission.

If you have had a transient ischaemic attack (TIA) you may be allowed to fly after 10 days, provided that you have made a complete recovery and you have your doctor's permission.

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 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, which will allow you to keep your chest clear.

It is quite safe to use any of your inhalers in the pressurised cabin, keep them with you 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.

Remain as mobile as possible throughout the flight if you are not using oxygen.

Cystic fibrosis sufferers should undertake physiotherapy during stop-overs if taking long haul flights.

When can I fly?

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

Tuberculosis

Infective Pulmonary TB sufferers must not fly or use any public transport.

Pneumothorax

You should be able to fly one week after complete re-expansion of the lung is confirmed by chest x-ray. This is two weeks if it was a traumatic pneumothorax (i.e. caused by a blunt or penetrating injury).

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

You are not allowed to fly after major chest surgery for at least 8-10 weeks until the sternum or any ribs are healed.

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

0845 077 6000