

AIRLINE TRAVEL TIPS FOR PEOPLE USING A WHEELCHAIR

If possible, it is recommended that your first flight be a short flight (approximately 2 hours or less).

Reserving the Flight –

1. Check with the airline directly (website/phone) for policies regarding wheelchairs, transfers, etc...
2. Speak to an agent prior to booking flight.
3. Inform agent of physical condition and that you use a wheelchair
4. Ask about specific policies regarding wheelchairs, transfers, and whether your plane will have an accessible bathroom, etc...
5. Bulkhead aisle seat will give you more room in front but, generally, the armrests are fixed so you may need to be transferred. (“disabled seat” as called by some airlines, removable arm rest if possible).
6. Confirm with agent that your wheelchair will fit in cargo hold of the plane; generally all Boeing and Airbus plans are ok; prop planes are the biggest challenge. Know the overall dimensions of your wheelchair, (height, length, width, weight). You may want to have this written down and attached to the chair.
7. Find out size of aisle chair.
8. Inform airline if you will be bringing an assistant/personal care attendant (PCA) to help you get to the plane (this will require special security pass).
9. Ask airline about their product replacement costs (in case your chair is damaged).
10. You may wish to consult a travel agent who specializes in travel for people with disabilities.

Preparation for Airline Travel

1. Practice (or have caregiver) taking wheelchair apart as much as it will be disassembled for the flight (or instructing someone) and putting it together again. (There is nothing like having to take apart a wheelchair for the first time while 100 – 200 people are waiting to get on a flight.)
2. Obtain inexpensive tools required to take wheelchair apart/repair. Check your owner’s manual for specific recommendations. A typical wheelchair requires the following tools: standard Allen wrench set, 3/8 inch, two 7/16 inch, and 1/2 inch wrenches, and zip ties. If you have a Roho cushion take your pump.
3. For power wheelchair users, confirm that you have gel batteries, if not, you will need to have gel batteries in order to fly.
4. For manual wheelchair users, consider hard rubber tires or solid inserts for travel (no flats).
5. Take pictures of your wheelchair from all sides. (Without you in it)
6. Schedule you travel days with a lot of extra time to allow for the unexpected.
7. Anticipate problems.
8. If possible, locate a medical supply or wheelchair repair company in close proximity to your destination.
9. Identify hospitals and pharmacies near your destination.

10. Know how to direct all aspects of your care.
11. If you use intermittent catheterization you may want to consider using an indwelling catheter. You may wish to discuss this with your health care provider.
12. If you have a bowel program, complete earlier in day or day prior to flight.

Packing

1. Bring an extra duffle bag/carryon bag to put removed items from your wheelchair (cushion, sideguards, headrest, etc.)
2. Pack a carry-on bag with all things needed for personal care for 2 days for example: medications, utensils, extra clothing, equipment needed for catheterization, bowel program, (changes in your program may arise when traveling), supplies related to autonomic dysreflexia, etc. As an experienced traveler says, "You do not want to leave your bowel program behind." Talk with your nurse or doctor about bringing antibiotics, in case of urinary tract infection.
3. If you have an air cushion, bring the pump and patch kit.
4. Pack, in an easily accessible place, inexpensive tools needed to take apart wheelchair.
5. Pack pictures of wheelchair.
6. Label all parts of wheelchair with your name and phone number, as well as what the part is.
7. May want to use a rolling suitcase and use curbside check-in. For clothing items anticipate climate at destination. Please refer to references below for specific recommendations.

Day of Travel

1. At all times keep your sense of humor.
2. Wear very comfortable clothing.
3. Airplanes can be cold during the flight or hot when sitting on the tarmac. Wear layered clothing, roomy shoes so you can layer socks.
4. Some people use a leg bag and bring a second one to drain the first.
5. Allow extra time for check in, etc...(especially first time traveling)
6. Plan your fluid and salt intake, keeping in mind ability to access/ or not access bathroom on plane.

At the Airport

1. Arrive early and check-in as soon as possible.
2. Ask for a "gate check tag" for wheelchair.
3. For power wheelchair users, be prepared to inform the agent that you have gel batteries
4. Do not surrender your wheelchair until on the Jetway, at door of plane, with aisle chair ready.
5. Request that your wheelchair be returned to you on the Jetway, not baggage claim.

Security

1. Anticipate explaining to security that you require the tools to take apart your wheelchair so it can be stowed in the cargo hold. Tools still may be confiscated, (thus the inexpensive tools).

2. If you carry a backpack on your wheelchair, be prepared to remove it and send it through the X-ray machine.
3. Anticipate anywhere from a few minutes to 1.5 hours to get through security (not including the time waiting in line to get to security)

At the Gate

1. When you arrive at the gate, check in immediately or as soon as the agent arrives. Make sure your name is on the list for stowing a wheelchair in cargo hold. This is important because airlines have limited space in the cargo hold for wheelchairs and the space is provided on a first come first serve basis. If your wheelchair does not make the flight it will come on the next available flight. In the meanwhile the airline will provide a standard manual wheelchair at your destination airport.
2. Reconfirm that your wheelchair be returned to you at the Jetway not the baggage claim.
3. At the end of the Jetway you will transfer/be transferred to an airline aisle chair (average seat width 14”) and be wheeled onto the plane by airline personnel.
4. Remove all removable parts of wheelchair (sideguards, cushion, armrests, headrests, laptrays, footrests, etc.) and place them in the duffle bag and carry it on the plane. Anticipate that if a part is removable it will be lost by the airline. Also anticipate any adjustable part to be reconfigured when you receive your wheelchair at your destination. Know how to put your wheelchair back together.
5. Keep your cushion out.
6. For manual wheelchairs fold the back down and secure it with string or zip ties. Make your wheelchair as compact as possible. Deflate your tires slightly (to accommodate the air pressure changes in the cargo hold). Secure your wheels to the frame.
7. For power wheelchair, disconnect batteries or inform airline personnel how to disconnect battery.
8. Generally, you will be the first person on the plane.

On the Plane

1. Place your cushion on the plane seat.
2. Transfer onto the plane seat. If you are dependent for transfers or require some assistance, two to three airline personnel will lift you from the aisle chair over the non-removable armrest onto the plane seat. **Be prepared to direct these people.** Anticipate this transfer not to be like the transfers your caregiver does or the ones in the hospital.
3. Keep in mind that the plane seat is not designed for someone with positioning needs or insensate skin. This seat back reclines only slightly. The seat is fairly narrow in width. The armrest on the aisle seat may not flip back. In a regular seat, there is not much room to maneuver; pressure releases are difficult to do unless you can do a press up. In the bulk head a caregiver can usually help with a forward or lateral pressure release.
4. If you use a catheter on long flights, bring a urinal or second leg bag to drain the catheter bag. Check that you are not sitting on the catheter tube or that the bag is compressed or leaking.
5. Confirm with flight attendant that your chair was loaded and make sure it will be waiting for you when you land.
6. When the plane lands and begins to break, you may be pushed forward if you do not have trunk control. Be prepared to brace yourself or have someone brace you.

Note: Delta airlines have new hydraulic aisle chairs, which will allow for easier transfers.

Destination Airport

1. You will be the last to get off the plane; the reverse of how you were loaded.
2. Upon receiving your wheelchair on the Jetway, do a quick inspection before/as you/caregiver sets it up. If there is any damage go immediately to the airlines customer service and file a complaint. Use the pictures of the wheelchair you took prior to leaving home to demonstrate that the damage is new.
3. For power wheelchair, have caregiver turn and drive/tilt the chair before you transfer into it. It is much easier to direct a person to connect the proper wires when you are not in your chair.
4. If you have areas of decreased sensation or no sensation it is recommended that you perform a thorough skin check as soon as possible. If there is a non-fading area, plan to spend time off the affected area.

Repairs

1. Read the specific policies for that airline for repairs to damaged wheelchairs.
2. If going to somewhere with rough terrain bring Fix-a-Flat.
3. If traveling internationally try to keep the repair people from taking apart the wheelchair.

References:

Department of Transportation Hotline for travelers with Disabilities-1-800 778-4838
General information, requests for written information and assistance with time sensitive disability related issues, complaints.

Transportation Security Administration

www.tsa.gov

Flying with Disability

www.flying-with-disability.org

Society for Accessible Travel and Hospitality

www.SATH.org

United Spinal Association

www.unitedspinal.org

Airshells protective wheelchair covering for flying www.airshells.us/?page=The-only-approved-protective-safety-bag-for-wheelchairs-and-walkers-Rolators