Flying With Asthma: What Patients Need to Know

Our easy-to-read fact sheets provide clinicians with reliable information to share with patients and their caregivers.

Traveling with asthma can be challenging.

Asthma is a chronic respiratory condition that causes airways in the lungs to narrow and become inflamed. This makes it harder for air to flow out of the lungs, so that breathing becomes difficult. When managed properly, it is possible for patients with asthma to continue their normal activities and to travel.

Before traveling, patients should speak with their health care provider to determine whether it is safe for them to fly. Patients with severe asthma can develop an asthma management plan with their providers to help in case of an emergency.

Asthma Exacerbation Risk With Flying

Asthma exacerbations are among the most common emergencies reported by many major airlines. Exacerbations can present as coughing; wheezing, chest tightness, and/or shortness of breath.

On an airplane, changes in cabin pressure, which cause oxygen concentration levels to fluctuate, may contribute to asthma exacerbation risk. In the air, the partial pressure of oxygen is 25% to 30% lower than at sea level.

These changes result in reduced oxygen blood saturation. In individuals with respiratory diseases, this may lead to complications such as hyperventilation — which presents as increased breathing, chest tightness, and/or light-headedness — and increased heart rate.

Medications: What to Know, How to Pack

When packing for a trip, all medications should be accessible in a carry-on or personal item and not checked in. Medications to pack may include:
● rescue inhalers;
● maintenance inhalers;
● emergency corticosteroids; and
● epinephrine auto-injectors.

Patients should carry their asthma medication with them at all times in a personal bag that is easily accessible. According to the TSA, all medications are recommended to be clearly labeled for screening. Medically-necessary liquids, medications, and creams are allowed in excess of 3.4 ounces or 100 milliliters.

Some countries have rules about specific prescription or over-the-counter medications that are different from your departing location. For international travel, checking specific travel guidelines and restrictions is important to ensure a safe and smooth trip.

**Asthma Triggers and Travel**

When traveling, it is especially important for individuals with asthma to understand and avoid factors that may trigger their asthma and potentially result in an exacerbation.

Some asthma triggers include:

- physical activity;
- environmental allergens, such as, dust mites, pollen, mold and pet dander;
- air quality, such as cold air or humidity;
- emotional factors or stress;
- use of aspirin and beta-blockers; and
- viral respiratory tract infections.

Notably, not all asthma exacerbations develop the same way; they may be unique to the patient, and circumstances may differ for those with acute asthma (where shortness of breath or chest tightness occur more randomly in response to triggers or exertion) and those with chronic asthma (characterized by persistent inflammation and narrowing of the airways).
Traveling With Severe Asthma and Allergies

Asthma and allergies often go hand in hand. For patients who suffer from food allergies, it may be helpful to notify airlines about their food allergies ahead of travel time so that the airline can take steps to make the travel experience more comfortable and eliminate triggers. For instance, the airline might be able to provide patients with accommodations such as allergy-free zones and pre-boarding to ensure that patients can disinfect their area before being seated.

For patients with more severe asthma, travel can be a potentially dangerous experience, especially when traveling to developing countries. When traveling to such locations, a pre-travel consultation is recommended so that patients can discuss potential risk factors with their health care provider. Although there are risks, patients with well-managed asthma can usually mitigate these risks and travel successfully.

Checklist for Flying With Asthma

Patients with asthma might want to create a checklist to help ensure a safe travel experience. Checklist items may include:

1. Schedule an appointment with your health care provider to discuss whether traveling is safe for you.
2. Obtain an asthma action plan or written letter from your provider as needed.
3. Notify airlines of any special accommodations, such as food allergies, beforehand.
4. Become familiar with the travel guidelines at your destination.
5. Pack all medications with appropriate labels in a personal bag.
6. Become familiar with factors that trigger your asthma and act accordingly.

Frequently Asked Patient Questions

How can I avoid asthma triggers during my flight?

It is important to understand the triggers that exacerbate your asthma before taking a flight. Inform airlines ahead of time of any special accommodations you
may need due to your asthma and any allergies you may have. You can ask to
pre-board in order to wipe your area before being seated. Consider bringing your
own pillow to avoid indoor allergens. If your asthma is exercise induced, be sure
to arrive at the airport early to avoid rushing to catch your flight.

Throughout the flight, the air pressure will change with take-off and landing. A
dry cabin atmosphere can irritate mucosal membranes of the mouth and upper
respiratory tract, making it harder to breathe. To ease this situation, make sure to
stay hydrated and drink plenty of fluids. You may also take an antihistamine in
advance or consider a long-acting nasal decongestant spray before take-off and
landing if you are congested. To keep nasal membranes moist, a nasal saline
spray can be used once every hour. Be sure to get up frequently and walk around
the cabin if needed.

What if I have an asthma exacerbation in-flight?

If you experience an acute exacerbation on board, a rescue inhaler may help to
relieve symptoms. If symptoms do not respond rapidly with inhaler use or recur
after a short interval, immediately notify cabin crew.

Airlines have precautions in place in case of emergencies and are likely to have
protocols and supplies for addressing asthma-related emergencies. Emergency
medical kits available in flight commonly include:

- epinephrine;
- albuterol for nebulization;
- bronchodilator aerosol inhalers;
- antihistamine tablets and injectables; and
- hydrocortisone.

Realize that even though airlines may have these asthma relief medications in
their emergency medical kit, the airline may not have the specific medication
that works for you — so make sure to have the medications you need with
you at all times. Also, be sure to tell your travel companion(s) where your
medication is stored. If traveling alone, inform the cabin crew where your
medication is located in case of an emergency.
Are there any other factors that may put me at higher risk?

Going on a trip can be stressful, especially when a lot of planning is involved and there are external factors that you may not be able to control. Many risk factors for asthma exacerbations are psychologically based; with air travel, such stressors may include having to endure a long flight, limited seat space, flight delays, and jet lag. Other factors that heighten the risk for asthma-related problems are increased age and other pre-existing medical conditions.

Reducing stress while flying is key to avoiding asthma exacerbations. Plan ahead by arriving early, taking a buddy, and finding activities to do in flight that will help to pass the time on long flights. Refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages during your flight and opt for more hydrating, healthy alternatives.