AIR TRAVEL

FOR PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CHEST, HEART & STROKE ILLNESS

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

FACTSHEET

This factsheet provides information about medical clearance for flying, practical advice when planning a trip, and tips for staying safe and comfortable on your journey. It also answers some commonly asked questions about flying with a chest, heart or stroke condition.

CHSS is **not able** to advise you whether it is safe for you to fly. As everyone is affected differently by chest, heart and stroke illness you might want to speak to your doctor to discuss any concerns or risks regarding your fitness to fly.

If you have any concerns about your fitness to fly you should contact your airline's medical department before travelling. This will allow your fitness to fly to be assessed and medical clearance obtained if necessary before you travel. It will also allow the airline staff to help you with early boarding and in-flight care if required.

Medical clearance to fly

You may need to obtain medical clearance if:

- You have a medical condition that is unstable
- You have recently been admitted to hospital
- You have recently had surgery
- You require oxygen or medical treatment onboard
- You need to use medical equipment onboard

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Medical Information Form (MEDIF)

To determine whether you are medically fit to fly, you and your doctor will need to complete a MEDIF form. This form can usually be found online on your airline's website, or you can contact your airline's medical department or your travel agent to get a MEDIF form. The completed form should be sent to your airline well in advance of your travel date.

If you need any special medical provision or assistance, 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.

Frequent Traveller's Medical Card (FREMEC)

If you travel frequently you may be able to get a FREMEC card from your airline's medical department. Once you have registered, your airline's reservations office will record details of your requirements so that any special assistance can be provided whenever you fly. If you plan to travel with a different airline you should check if they will accept your FREMEC card.

A FREMEC card can be particularly useful if you have ongoing health concerns.

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 help from airport or airline staff at any stage of your journey, you should always request this at least 48 hours before you fly. If you are making a last-minute booking then your airline should make a 'reasonable' effort to provide you with assistance.

When booking online, you may not be able to fully explain your situation so you may need to contact your airline or travel agent directly.

Some other things to consider in advance are:

- Arrange to take a letter from your doctor with you, outlining your medical condition(s) and what drugs you are on.
- Ensure you have adequate travel insurance, preferably including the cost of flying home. *(See the CHSS factsheet 'Insurance information for people affected by chest, heart and stroke illness' for more information).*
- Make sure that you have sufficient supplies of all your drugs for your entire holiday/ trip away.
- Make sure that you have a supply of emergency drugs (for example antibiotics or steroids) if appropriate, in case you become ill when you are away.
- If you will need oxygen during the flight, this must be requested in advance and preferably at the time of booking.
- Nebulisers can be used at your airline's discretion; if you will need to use a nebuliser during the flight, you will need to inform the airline in advance. Remember that proper use of spacers can be just as effective.
- If you require transport within the airport, you will need to arrange it in advance.

On the day you fly:

- Try to arrive early at the airport: this gives you plenty of time to get organised.
- Keep any drugs in your hand luggage. This is especially important for drugs that you might need to use during your journey, such as inhalers or GTN spray. Current security regulations mean that you can only take small (less than 100ml) quantities of liquids in hand luggage. Please check with your airline for the most up-to-date information.
- Wear comfortable clothing when you travel.
- Drink plenty of water or other non-alcoholic drink both before and during your flight. This can help prevent dehydration, which can make respiratory problems worse, which in turn can increase the risk of catching a respiratory virus. Try to avoid alcohol and caffeine-containing drinks, as they will contribute to dehydration.

Some common questions

Should I worry about a deep vein thrombosis (DVT)?

When flying, 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 this inactivity, especially during a long-distance flight. The following simple measures will help reduce the risk of a DVT:

- Avoid dehydration by drinking plenty of non-alcoholic fluids throughout the journey; if necessary take your own bottle of water and take regular sips. Remember that alcohol and caffeine can contribute to dehydration.
- Bend and stretch your legs and wiggle your feet at regular intervals (for example every 30 minutes) to encourage your circulation.
- 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. This may include graduated compression stockings, aspirin or anticoagulants.

Can the cabin atmosphere affect my chest condition?

Most people with chest conditions are able to tolerate normal aircraft conditions.

- Because the cabin air is pressurised, not as much oxygen reaches your blood. If you need oxygen, make sure it is organised well in advance (see below).
- Aircraft cabins have low humidity levels meaning that your sputum may become thicker. Drinking plenty of fluids will keep you hydrated and will help to 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.

If you have had a recent exacerbation (flare-up) of your condition, you should be fully recovered before you fly. If you are in any doubt about your fitness to fly you must speak to your doctor or contact your airline's medical clearance team.

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 your airline know when you book your seat.
- Each airline will have its own policy regarding the supply and use of in-flight oxygen, e.g. what flow rates are available and what charges, if any, are applicable.
- 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.

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When can I fly after a heart attack?
You should speak to your doctor about any travel plans. They will advise you when it is safe for you to fly following your heart attack.

Fitness to fly may be in question if there were any complications after your heart attack, if you still have any symptoms (such as chest pain or breathlessness), or if you are due to receive any more tests or treatment.

Can I fly home if I become ill on holiday?
You, your family and your doctors will need to balance the risks of flying against the benefits of going home. The doctor looking after you will decide if you are fit to fly.

Practical issues, travel insurance and airline regulations will also have to be considered. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office provide consular assistance (Tel: 020 7008 1500) and the document 'Support for British nationals abroad: a guide' can be downloaded from www.fco.gov.uk

Can I go through airport security with an implanted cardiac device?
Travelling by air should not present a problem if you have been fitted with an implanted cardiac device. In this factsheet, implanted cardiac device refers to **pacemakers, cardiac resynchronisation therapy** (CRT) devices and **implantable cardioverter defibrillators** (ICD). There are other cardiac devices which are implanted for short or long term investigations or treatment. If you have one of these devices, check with your doctor or nurse specialist before planning to travel by air. It is **important to carry your personal device identification card with you at all times when travelling as it contains essential information for security staff.**

Implanted cardiac devices are designed so that they should not be affected by the security screening equipment. To minimise the risk of temporary interference when going through airport security screening:

- Tell one of the security staff that you have an implanted cardiac device and show them your identification card.
- Avoid touching metal surfaces around any screening equipment.
- If asked to do so, walk through the screening archway at a normal pace; it will not harm your device, do not stay near the archway any longer than is necessary. The metal casing of your device may set off the security alarm.
- If possible, ask to be hand searched rather than with a hand-held wand. If a hand-held wand is used, ask the security staff to avoid holding it over your device or the area surrounding it.

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If you have concerns about the security screening speak to a member of the security staff team who will help you to negotiate the necessary security checks. Once on board the aircraft your devices will not cause any interference to the aircraft's electronic systems.

Further sources of information

Civil Aviation Authority (CAA)

Consumer advice line: 020 7379 7311 (Mon to Fri, 9.00am to 2.30pm)
Website: www.caa.co.uk

The CAA produces information for your journey including advice for travel related problems.

Useful documents:

'Support for British nationals abroad: A guide' available from The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2014)
Consular Assistance Tel: 020 7008 1500
Email: fcocorrespondence@fco.gov.uk
Website: www.fco.gov.uk

'Your rights to fly: What You Need To Know' (A step-by-step guide for disabled and less mobile air passengers) (2014)
Tel: 08456 045510 (Scotland)
Website: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Guidelines your doctor may use:

'Fitness to fly for passengers with cardiovascular disease' British Cardiovascular Society July (2010)

'Assessing fitness to fly' Guidelines from the Aviation Health Unit, UK Civil Aviation Authority (2010)

British Thoracic Society Air travel Recommendations (2013).

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence, please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line

0808 801 0899

Free from landlines and mobiles.