

# 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?

### You will need medical clearance to fly if:

#### Your fitness is in doubt as a result of:

- a recent illness
- a period in hospital
- recent surgery
- you have an acute or chronic condition that is unstable

#### 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:

- You need a medical escort.
- You are carrying any special medical equipment.

If any of the criteria above 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.

## 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.

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## 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. If you are making a last-minute booking then your airline should make a 'reasonable' effort to provide you with assistance.

- A medical check-up may be needed before booking your holiday.
- Arrange to take a doctors 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/trip away.
- Oxygen must be requested 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. 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. Remember to ask your airline what its policy is when you are booking your flight.
- 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.

## **Further sources of information**

'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)



## Existing medical conditions and flying

Every person is an individual and how each person is affected by their own personal medical history will be different. For this reason CHSS are not able to advise on exactly when you can fly. Your own doctor will apply guidelines to your situation and discuss any risks before advising you.

Many people with chest, heart and stroke conditions will meet the criteria mentioned at the beginning of this factsheet, where medical assessment of fitness to fly is required, for example:

- A recent illness
- A period in hospital
- Recent surgery
- An acute or chronic condition that is unstable
- The need for any special provision e.g. oxygen, medical equipment

If you have an existing condition that is stable, you are likely to have no problems with flying. However you still need to seek your doctor's advice before planning or booking a flight.

Also, if you are planning to travel for a holiday, it might be better to wait until you have either had a full recovery period or your condition is stable. Then you will be able to enjoy your holiday even more.



## **Flying with Chest conditions**

Cabin air is pressurised and contains less oxygen; however most people with chest complaints are likely to be able to tolerate normal aircraft conditions.

- Remember that your sputum will become stickier in the low humidity of the plane's 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.

### ***Tuberculosis***

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

### ***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***

Following major chest surgery it might be a good idea to wait long enough for the chest bone and ribs to heal before flying.

## **Flying with Heart conditions**

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

The functioning of your pacemaker, implantable 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.

**Angina**

It is safe to use your GTN spray in the cabin so be sure to keep it on you.

**Heart surgery**

Following open heart surgery it might be a good idea wait long enough for the chest bone and ribs to heal before flying.

**Flying with Stroke conditions**

Deciding when to fly after having a stroke is a very complex decision to make. You and your doctor will need to balance the risks of flying against the benefits. You will also need to consider the practical issues, insurance and airline regulations.

If your stroke has left you with a disability then you may want to wait for several months before flying.

**Further information**

‘Fitness to fly for passengers with cardiovascular disease’ British Cardiovascular Society July 2010 (Advice about the risks of flying for passengers with cardiovascular disease)

‘Assessing fitness to fly’ Guidelines from the Aviation Health Unit, UK Civil Aviation Authority.



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 - 4.00pm**

**0845 077 6000**