

Traveling with Lung Disease

Travelers with lung disease often need specific help because of the need for supplemental oxygen. Supplemental oxygen at each stage of travel is the responsibility of the individual and not the airline, cruise line, or other travel service. For this reason, it will be important for you to do advance planning to arrange for oxygen in flight, at your destination, and during flight changes or other modes of travel.

The following information from the Merck Manual's On-line Library¹ may be helpful to consider when deciding your mode of travel and oxygen needs.

"Travelers with lung cysts, severe emphysema, a large collection of fluid around the lungs (pleural effusion), recent chest surgery, or recent lung collapse can develop complications from airplane pressure changes and should not fly without approval from their doctor.

Other travelers with lung disease may need supplemental oxygen while aboard an airplane. A doctor determines a person's need for in-flight oxygen by measuring the level of oxygen in the blood. Airlines will provide in-flight oxygen if given a doctor's prescription and 48-hours' notice; travelers are not allowed to carry oxygen in any form aboard an airplane. Travelers who need oxygen during airport layovers must make their own arrangements, although most oxygen vendors will assist their regular customers without charge. Other respiratory equipment, such as continuous positive airway pressure devices, can be accommodated on an airplane provided the equipment does not exceed the size allowed for carry-on luggage. However, travelers who need this equipment should allow extra time for security checks.

Travel at high altitudes may present special problems because there is less oxygen available than at sea level. In general, people with mild or moderate lung problems do not experience any difficulty at altitudes below 5,000 feet, but the greater the altitude, the greater the chance of problems. People with lung disease traveling in or through such areas should

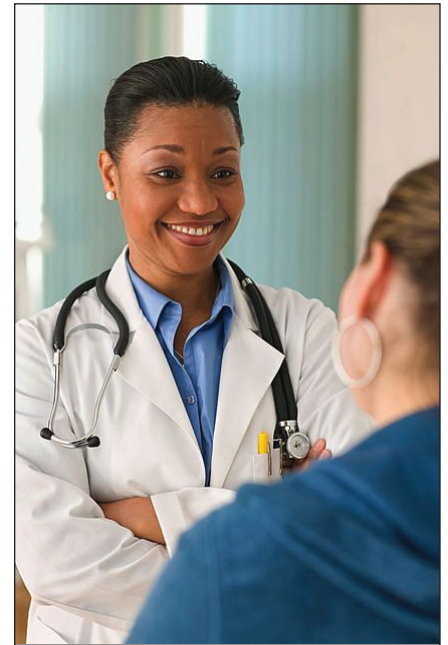
take the same precautions that they would if they were flying.

Bus, train, car, and ship travel is safe for people with lung disease but requires planning to ensure a supply of oxygen. Commercial services can coordinate oxygen deliveries for travelers anywhere in the world.

People with asthma, emphysema, or bronchitis may find that their symptoms worsen in cities where air pollution is significant. They may need additional treatments from their inhalers or additional drugs, such as corticosteroids, to control symptoms adequately."¹

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI)² also offers these tips for travelers needing supplemental oxygen:

- **Travel on non-stop or direct flights.** Because many airlines base their oxygen charges on the number of segments in a trip, using non-stop or direct flights may save money. If you need oxygen service on the ground but have a direct flight, you may be able to stay on the plane during stops in order to receive a continuous supply of oxygen.
- **Find out what equipment is available.** Equipment varies, even among planes in the same airline. Verify that your prescribed flow rate can be provided. On most airplanes, supplemental oxygen can be used only in certain seats.
- **Arrange for oxygen on the ground.** Airlines do not provide supplemental oxygen service in airport terminals.



- **Shop around for the best total price.** Charges for supplemental oxygen vary by airline and by oxygen supply companies that service airports. If an oxygen company representative needs to meet your plane, you may be charged more if you travel outside of normal business hours.
- **Plan ahead.** Most airlines request two weeks notice that supplemental oxygen will be needed, although some will accommodate requests made only 48 hours in advance.
- **Get answers.** If the ticket agent cannot answer all of your questions, speak to someone in the airline's medical or special services department.
- **Bring your nasal cannula.** Some airlines provide only masks.
- **Confirm all arrangements** 48 hours before your flight.
- **Arrive early.** Unfortunately, mistakes happen. If last-minute arrangements have to be made because of miscommunications among the reservations agent, the medical office, and the ground crew, arriving 90 minutes or more before your flight is scheduled to leave can give the airline a chance to obtain and install the oxygen tank so you can travel as planned.
- **Carry extra copies of your doctor's letter.** The airport first aid station may have oxygen available

if you have an unexpected layover or get stranded, but you will need to provide your doctor's instructions.

- **Get help.** Travel is tiring; just because you *can* walk the length of the terminal, doesn't mean you *should*. Don't hesitate to use the airport's wheelchair services, baggage assistance, and mobile carts. Carry small bills to tip service providers.²

Traveling with lung disease requires some advance planning, but it doesn't have to stop you from traveling. Discuss your condition with your doctor – how best to travel and with what supplies. Then, make arrangements, confirm them in advance, and enjoy your trip.

Sources:

1. Merck & Company (2003). Travel and health: Merck manual home edition [on-line]. Retrieved February 22, 2008. From <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/print/sec25/ch303/ch303a.html>.
2. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (2003). American Thoracic Society (ATS) public advisory roundtable (PAR) members discuss barriers faced by patients requiring supplemental oxygen during air travel [on-line]. Retrieved April 4, 2008. From <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/public/sept03/corner.htm#par>.