Flying With COPD: What You Need to Know

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Air Travel With COPD

Is the thought of air travel too daunting to contemplate, or are you a frequent flyer? Many other chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) sufferers tell me it's too hard. With my experiences I have come to the conclusion that while flying with COPD can be difficult, it is possible.

Starting Point

If you plan to travel by plane, either on a domestic or international flight, you need to talk to your doctor about your oxygen requirements. If supplementary oxygen is already a part of your life, then it will be part of your time in the sky. If, like me, you don't need supplementary oxygen on a daily basis, you will need to undergo an altitude test at a respiratory clinic or hospital.

Altitude testing is a simple process in which you are connected to a machine that can simulate altitude and the effect on your breathing and oxygen levels. We know as COPD patients the higher we are above sea level, the more difficult it is to breathe. The altitude test will measure your oxygen level changes at the altitude an aircraft flies.

My own testing resulted in an oxygen level drop to 81 percent, which is below a safe level, so it is necessary for me to have supplementary oxygen when traveling by air. Your doctor will be able to determine from the test results your oxygen requirements and type of device needed.

You can either purchase or hire your oxygen device from a retailer. Some airlines will even provide oxygen cylinders at an additional cost.

Booking Your Flight

This is where you need to be careful, as policies regarding flying with oxygen can vary between airlines — from what's available on board, to the country's regulations.

In fact, right now I am working with an airline to correct shortcomings in their policies on traveling with oxygen. Upon further investigation I've unearthed more shortcomings in policies adapted by a national aviation authority, so stay tuned for more on that.

You need to be fanatical about this process; you will be required to have your doctor complete a medical clearance form (most airlines have downloadable forms on their websites), and you will also have to check your airlines approved devices list to ensure your oxygen device will be allowed on board the aircraft.

When choosing your device and airline, it is important to know how you will power the device for the journey ahead. If relying on battery power, you should have enough batteries for the flight time and allow for any delays.

In the United States you are required to carry enough batteries to power your device for 150 percent of your flight time, which can amount to many batteries. Some airlines have power outlets in the seats, so you're not reliant totally on battery power.

It's important to talk to your airline about what your responsibilities are relating to powering your device and what you will need to take. I would suggest if you have any doubts to contact your local aviation authority who sets the rules.

Many airlines have a special assistance telephone number where they can take you through what's involved. However, I recommend at least a week before you fly to check with the airline and ensure they have all appropriate forms so you don't have any stress on the day you fly.

Next page: planning international flights and how to prepare the day of travel.

Booking Your Flight

If you have connecting flights, make sure when booking you allow enough time to make your way to the connection without being rushed. Arriving at a departure gate in a stressed state and gasping for breath can result in you being assessed to see if you're still able to fly.

International Flights

It is reasonably easy to power your device when traveling domestically, as three to four batteries will suffice if on-board power is not available on many flights. However, when traveling on an international flight, things can become a little tricky.

Most international airlines offer power outlets on their flights; however, some airlines provide power outlets in all seating, while some airlines only have power available in their premium economy, business and first class seats.

If the airline you choose does not have power available in the economy seats, you will be paying significantly more for a powered seat. This, to me, seems discriminatory as surely all seats on international flights should have power outlets for medical devices.

When I flew from Australia to the U.S. I had to take four batteries to ensure enough power for the flight. However, the U.S law required me to carry 150 percent of my travel time, which would mean carrying six batteries. Australian law states you can only take two spare batteries with you, which is three in total. So I can't legally fly to the U.S. unless I pay for an upgraded seat, which in this case was an extra $2,000 each.

Thankfully, our airline provided a free upgrade once my wife alerted them to our predicament. This is an issue that remains unresolved, but the airline is working with us to resolve these issues so in the future oxygen patients can fly without the problems we experienced. Needless to say it's important to check which airlines offer the best options for your oxygen requirements.

Time to Fly

Before you leave home, double check you have everything relating to your oxygen requirements: your device, batteries, power cords, nasal cannula, pulse oximeter and relevant paper work the airline should already have a copy of. Make sure all your device settings are programmed, as you don't want to be doing this on the aircraft. Allow yourself time to allow for any problems you may encounter, either in transit to the airport or with checking in.

Be prepared to be delayed through security. In my experience, most staff do not know what a continuous flow portable oxygen concentrator is — some suspect it's an explosive device. Most security staff pull it off the scanning conveyor belt and have it tested for explosive residue.

Once you’re checked in and arrived at your departure gate, it’s advisable to make yourself known to the boarding staff and ask if you can board early. This will allow you time to set up your device and position it in a place that doesn’t interfere with other passengers. I try to book a window seat where possible, as there is more room to position the device.

It’s Worth It

While my wife and I have had many stressful days organizing flights and portable oxygen machines, we have also enjoyed our travels and met some great fellow COPD patients. So don’t let red tape spoil your holiday plans — allow plenty of time to plan and book your holiday.

Make sure the airline you use has all the documentation they need well before your departure date. Hopefully our experience will make your trip a little easier to organize.