Planning a Vacation? Here’s What to Expect from Traveling with COPD

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COPD and Travel

COPD affects at least 16 million Americans — and millions more that do not know they have it. Worldwide, 65 million people have moderate to severe COPD; this number is expected to rise over the next 50 years as the aging population rises.

As our aging population rises, many people will want to continue a similar quality of life. One such thing that many people enjoy is traveling, but traveling with COPD can be a challenge, though it is possible.

The Difficulties

According to Pulmonary Advisor, an estimated 12% of in-flight medical emergencies are attributed to respiratory illnesses. COPD is credited as the number one reason for pre-flight medical screenings.

There are several reasons why the risk of oxygenation issues increases while flying. According to the European Respiratory Review, among these reasons are:

- While flying, there is a higher risk for hypoxemia because arterial oxygen saturation (PaO2) can fall below critical limits.
- Hypoxemia-induced hyperventilation can occur; this leads to hyperinflation. When this occurs, respiratory muscles become fatigued on long flights.
- Pulmonary artery pressure increases, which increases afterload and dysfunction of the right ventricle.
- While sleeping during flights, oxygen desaturation may occur.
- "Problems related to the expansion of gases during the aircraft’s ascent, especially in patients with bullous emphysema or a history of pneumothorax".

But not everyone travels by air, and other means of travel may be fraught with difficulty as well. Travelers with COPD who are in a car with a smoker may notice an uptick in symptoms.

Preparations for Traveling with COPD

There are many preparations that you can arrange before traveling to ensure a safe experience on a vacation.

If traveling by air:

- Consider the use of a portable oxygen concentrator. This allows the use of a smaller oxygen tank, making it easier to make a mad dash through an airport. However, make sure you consult the respective airline for specific rules regarding the use of such devices onboard.

- Ensure that proper supplies are on-hand, such as batteries and oxygen tubing. Carry enough to cover for any flight delays and unexpected circumstances, as well as layovers.
- Make arrangements for oxygen delivery with the airline prior to flying. There is likely an additional charge.
- Try to obtain a seat by the bathroom whenever possible.

If traveling by car:

- Do not allow anyone to smoke in the car.
- Keep a window open a crack to allow for ventilation throughout the car.
- The oxygen tank should be placed beside you. Secure with a seat belt if possible, and store additional tanks on the floor.

If traveling by bus or train:

- Call the local terminal several weeks before traveling to discuss arrangements, whenever possible.
- Tell management that you are traveling with oxygen. Advocate that you should travel on a lower level; you should have no issues traveling with oxygen on-board the bus or train.

If you are traveling on a cruise:

- Call the cruise line four to six weeks before departure; this ensures that proper documentation can be procured, such as a letter from a healthcare provider and current oxygen prescription.
- Prior arrangements will likely be required to ensure that oxygen is delivered to the cruise ship before departure.

Considerations for Traveling with COPD

Even when making the best of plans, a COPD exacerbation can occur. It is important to be prepared for the worst, no matter where you go.

The first step to traveling with COPD is ensuring that you are healthy enough to travel. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends proper vaccinations — especially a yearly influenza vaccine and a pneumococcal vaccine — which may need to be “boosted” every five to 10 years. It is also important to abstain from travel when your COPD symptoms are flaring.

Additional recommendations include:

- Notifying your healthcare provider of your travel plans and discussing them with your doctor.
- Ensuring that you have enough medications packed for the duration of your travel (including a buffer for any unexpected delays).
- Carrying a letter from your provider, as well as a prescription for oxygen.
- Carrying a list of pertinent contact information, including your healthcare provider, respiratory therapist, oxygen supplier and home health care provider.
- Wearing emergency medical identification.

The Bottom Line

It is very possible to travel with COPD if the proper precautions are taken. The more you plan ahead of time and think through scenarios, the more relaxing and stress-free your vacation will be. Make sure to always discuss your travel plans with your healthcare provider; since they have the best understanding of your health and medical history, they will be able to best advise you.