

Traveling With COPD



COPD
FOUNDATION





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**This Slim Skinny Reference Guide:
"Traveling with COPD" is part of the
COPD Foundation's *Slim Skinny*
Reference Guide® series.**

The COPD Foundation's mission is to prevent and cure Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and to improve the lives of all people affected by COPD.

Traveling with COPD

Having a chronic lung disease does not mean you have to give up traveling. People with COPD* can still take vacations, visit friends and family and see the world. You will just need to do a little extra planning. You can have a safe and fun trip. The information in this Guide can help you plan for it.

**COPD is an umbrella term used to describe the progressive lung diseases including: emphysema (em-fa-see-ma), chronic bronchitis (kron-ick-brawn-kie-tis), refractory (re-frac-ta-ree) asthma (az-ma) and some forms of bronchiectasis (brawn-key-eck-tay-sis). If you have COPD you have trouble moving air in and out of your lungs because of damage to the airways and/or the air sacs.*



Important Travel Tips for People with COPD

1) ALWAYS discuss your travel plans with your doctor.

Your doctor will tell you if you are well enough to travel. Tell your doctor how long you will be gone and how you will travel. Make sure your doctor knows about the weather and climate of the place to which you are traveling. This could have an effect on your health.

2) Create a folder of important medical papers.

Put these with your travel papers. Make sure you can easily get to this folder at any point during your trip. You should include a list of the medicines you are taking. If you are on oxygen, include your oxygen prescription. You may also want to include a letter from your doctor. The letter can include a brief outline of your condition. It should state that you are fit to travel.

For more information about preparing your home for a disaster, check out the Disaster Preparedness Plan kit. It includes letters to share with your utility companies about your medical equipment. It also includes Contact Lists and Packing Lists, which may be helpful for packing for travel.

3) Keep a list of all important contact information and phone numbers.

This list should include your doctor and your emergency family contact. It should also include the airline, train or cruise line on which you are traveling. Also include a contact person at your final stop. This list should be kept in your travel folder.

4) Get the name and location of a doctor and hospital in the city to which you are traveling.

You should have this information just in case you need care while away. Your doctor can help you with this. It is most important to have this info if you have planned a long visit.

5) Have all of your medicines refilled. Take enough for your entire trip.

If you are traveling by plane, keep some medicines in your carry-on bag. Make sure all medicines are labeled. They should be in their original containers.

6) Review your health insurance before you leave. Some policies do not cover you while you are out of state or out of the country. You may want to get a temporary policy. A travel agent can help you with this.

7) It is best to have a travel partner (spouse or friend).

Make sure he/she knows about your special needs. Your travel partner should understand your medicines. They should also understand how to handle oxygen equipment.

Traveling With Oxygen

If you are on oxygen therapy, you will need to make plans for having oxygen with you as you travel. Your home oxygen supplier can help you. National chains can get in touch with their branch offices for you. Local suppliers are often members of a network of oxygen suppliers.

Discuss your entire trip with the oxygen supplier. It is best to provide details in writing to one contact person. Keep a record of this contact person. Faxing or emailing the plans you discuss is best. You will need to provide the following info:

- Your name, address and phone number.
- Your doctor's name and phone number.
- Your oxygen prescription. This must include your flow rate. It should list the type of system and equipment you need. You should also list any tubing, cannulas, humidifiers or nebulizers you may need.
- Your departing city, airport or port.
- A name, address and phone number of a contact person at your final travel stop.
- A name and number of an emergency contact.
- If traveling by plane, your airline, flight number and departure gate number. You should also include any stops or layovers and your arrival airport and arrival gate.



If you need continuous oxygen and are traveling by plane, you must work with your airline for your oxygen needs. (See the following section).

If you will be staying in a hotel, let the front desk know about your oxygen needs. Tell them that a supplier may deliver the oxygen before you arrive. Ask the supplier if a hotel worker can sign for the oxygen delivery. The supplier may not deliver without your signature. If this is true, have the delivery ticket emailed to you. Sign it and fax it back to the supplier before you leave for your trip. When you check in, have the oxygen delivered to your room. Or if it has not arrived yet, let the front desk know that it will be arriving soon.

Confirm all of your needs verbally and in writing. Review each part of your trip. Question any concerns. Make needed changes. The plans for traveling with oxygen can be tiresome. If you plan ahead for your oxygen needs you will have more freedom, and you will enjoy your travels more.

Traveling by Plane

Oxygen needs on the plane: There are some special issues that COPD patients need to know when flying. Airplane cabins are pressurized for high altitudes. This means there is less oxygen in the air of the plane during a flight. This is not usually

CAUTION:
Many people think that the emergency oxygen masks on a plane can be used by people who need oxygen during the flight. THIS IS NOT TRUE. Only 15 to 20 minutes of oxygen is provided through these masks. This oxygen is ONLY for emergency use if the plane loses cabin pressure.

a problem for people with healthy lungs. But it can cause people with COPD to be at risk of having low oxygen levels in their blood. This is called **hypoxemia** (*high-poc-see-me-ah*).

If you need oxygen during exercise or sleep, you may also need it for air travel. Talk with your doctor well before your trip. Your doctor will decide if you need to plan to have oxygen on the plane. You will need to give yourself enough time to have oxygen supplied, if you need it.

If your doctor decides you do need to have oxygen on the plane you may take your own. The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) now allows passengers to bring their own (or rented) portable oxygen concentrators on board a plane. The equipment must be one of their approved units. To find out which units are FAA approved, visit www.airlineoxygenCouncil.org. You must bring enough batteries for the equipment, for the entire flight. A flight across country could take between 3 and 6 large batteries. You should also bring extra tubing, cannulas, T-connectors, a cylinder wrench and electric adaptors. You will be prepared for any situation. Keep all of these items in your carry-on bag.



Before the FAA began allowing passengers to bring their own oxygen onto planes, airlines provided the oxygen for a fee. If you prefer to use the airline's oxygen, tell them before you purchase your ticket. You will probably be directed to the airline's medical desk or officer. You will need to provide your doctor's name and number. The medical officer will talk directly with your doctor. Your doctor may need to send in a special form with information about your needs. Most airlines need two weeks advance notice to provide oxygen. (Some airlines can make these plans in 48 hours). It is best to plan well in advance. The cost of oxygen from an airline can range from \$75 to \$150.

If you choose to purchase oxygen from the airlines, it is only for use in the plane. Airlines will not supply you with oxygen for use between flights. They will not provide you with oxygen for going to baggage claim areas. If you need oxygen in the airport, you will need to make arrangements with a supplier for each part of your trip.

Request a wheelchair: Consider asking for a wheelchair when you make your plane reservations. It can be a long walk to your gate. You might also have a long wait at the security check-in. A wheelchair will give you easy movement through the airport.

In the chair you will get a quick security check. A wheelchair is most helpful if you have a connecting flight. You should request a wheelchair with an attendant. They will assist you to your next flight. Riding instead of walking will save your energy. It will reduce your stress. Make these plans ahead of time. The airlines may provide you with a wheelchair and attendant. Or the airlines may have a motorized cart waiting for you at your gate.

If possible, have a travel partner: This person should know about your needs. They should be prepared to assist you. Your travel partner should understand the oxygen system you use. They should be able to change cylinders, open the valve, attach a regulator or conserver and adjust the flow.

Reduce the risk of infections: The air in a plane is fairly dry. This can put you at an increased risk of getting an upper respiratory infection. Also, the close seating in a plane can put you at risk for getting an infection. Take these steps to reduce the risk of infection:

- Drink plenty of water.
- Avoid coffee, tea and alcohol.
- Ask to be resealed if you are near someone coughing or sneezing.
- Consider wearing a mask. This will act as a barrier against airborne droplets.
- Have a filled prescription for antibiotics with you. Have this as a back-up plan. Having this with you will allow you to quickly treat any infection. This may keep you from getting much sicker.

Traveling by Train

Train travel can be an easy-to-use option. It does require most of the same advanced planning for oxygen needs. As with any other travel, you should discuss your oxygen needs with your doctor and your oxygen supplier. You should decide what you will need for your entire trip.

With a 12-hour notice, Amtrak can help people needing oxygen. You can bring your own oxygen equipment on the train. There is no extra charge. It must weigh less than 75 lbs. Oxygen concentrators must be able to run on battery power for up to 12 hours. You should plan for enough oxygen for your entire travel time, plus an extra 20 percent. If you use oxygen, you may only travel in non-smoking areas of the train.

As with any travel, make sure you have extra equipment supplies with you. If you need oxygen in your travel city, plan ahead with a local supplier.

Traveling by Car

Plan ahead when taking a trip by car. Some special considerations for car travel are:

- **Altitude:** This can cause breathing problems for you. Discuss this with your doctor. Map out your travel route. Decide your oxygen needs. Find stops along the way where tanks can be refilled.
- **Air pollution:** This may also cause you problems. Avoid driving during peak rush hours. Try to travel when there is less traffic. Avoid heavily traveled highways. Take back roads if possible. Keep the windows up. When weather allows, keep the air conditioning on.
- **Allergens:** Are you sensitive to certain allergens? Are you traveling through areas with these allergens? If so, consider taking your trip during a time of the year when these allergens are less of a problem.
- **Oxygen:** If you need oxygen, plan to have enough cylinders or tanks for the length of your travel. If you use a concentrator powered by the car's electrical system, have this system checked before you leave.



Make sure your car's battery and alternator can handle the extra demand. Secure extra cylinders. Make sure they are not banging around during the trip. Keep them in a well-ventilated area. Do not leave oxygen tanks in hot cars.

- **Be prepared:** Make sure your car has recently been serviced. Have the oil changed. Have the fluids checked. Make sure the spare tire is ok. Have a jack, jumper cables, flares, blankets and water in the car.

Taking a Cruise

Many cruise lines allow passengers to travel with oxygen. The cruise lines will need to know about your oxygen needs 4 to 6 weeks before your cruise. You must get approval from the cruise line's Special Services Department or the Operations Department, before you leave. A letter from your doctor will be required. The letter should say that you are ok to travel. It should also include a brief medical history. It will need to include your current prescriptions, including your oxygen needs.

You will probably be required to make your own plans for oxygen to be delivered to the cruise ship. You should discuss these details with the cruise liner's agents before your trip. There is usually no extra charge for you to bring your oxygen on-board. You will be asked to avoid being in the smoking areas of the ship.

Finally, With any travel, ALWAYS discuss your plans with your doctor. Planning ahead will help you have a safe trip. Your COPD does not have to keep you from traveling. With advance planning you can enjoy this freedom.



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**This Slim Skinny Reference Guide® (SSRG)
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