

Travelling with severe asthma

This factfile covers;

- What should I consider before I choose my holiday?
- What preparation should I make before I leave?
- Fitness to fly
- Nebulisers on planes
- In flight oxygen
- Assistance at the airport

Introduction

This factfile for people with severe asthma contains information to supplement the pages on our website on holidays and air travel found at the following link. Please refer to this link for important travel advice that applies to all people with asthma:

asthma.org.uk/traveladvice

People with severe asthma often find preparing for a holiday a lot of hard work. However, with careful thought and planning, you can have an enjoyable holiday.

What should I consider before I choose my holiday?

Choosing the type of holiday you want to have and the destination can be a challenge if you have severe asthma. The following points may help:

- The length of a flight may dictate where you are able to travel to. Be practical about your limitations. Ask your healthcare professional the length of journey they feel is safe for you. They may be required by the airline to declare you 'fit to fly'. See below for more information on this.
- Find out what the weather and climate is like at the time you are choosing to visit and if it could trigger your asthma. For example, is it hot and humid, or cold and windy, or is the air of poor quality there? Are there any factories or motorways giving off high levels of pollution which might affect your airways?
- Consider the location and research the available healthcare. How far away is the nearest hospital and will there be a language barrier? Choosing a trustworthy tour company with a representative on location may be of help.
- When it comes to accommodation check there are not too many stairs or ask to stay on the ground floor. Check you can cope with the environment nearby; it could be hilly. Check you will be able to access all the places you want to go without getting too breathless; for example, there may be steps or a hill down to the beach or pool.
- Find out about the meal arrangements, for example some hotels have buffet style service which requires you to walk around and may be difficult for you to cope with. Self-catering may be a better option.

What preparations should I make before I leave?

You may need to start preparing for your holiday a couple of months before you leave. This will give you plenty of time to ensure you have everything you need.

- Arrange travel insurance. More information about this can be found on the Asthma UK website at the link mentioned above. If travelling to Europe make sure your European Health Card is still in date.
- Book an appointment with your healthcare professional and review your personal **asthma action plan to make sure it is up to date.**

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What preparations should I make before I leave? (continued)

- Order the medicines you need to cover any problems whilst you are away plus a week's extra supply.
- Ask for a letter from your doctor which lists all your medicines (with the correct drug name rather than the manufacturer's name) and medical equipment you need to take with you, to enable you to get through security or at the airport. This includes your nebuliser, needles, syringes etc. Your doctor may charge you for this letter. Remember to keep your medicines in their original packaging with the prescribing details label attached.
- It is a good idea to take medicine with you in your hand luggage in case your baggage is lost. If you have a lot of asthma equipment and medicines it may be difficult to fit it all into your hand luggage. Make sure you carry at least four days worth of medicines with you.
- Consider obtaining a summary of your medical history and having it translated into the language of the country you are visiting.
- Make sure your nebuliser has been serviced and is working well. Make sure you have a mains adaptor to suit the electricity supply at your destination. You might consider borrowing a portable battery operated nebuliser to use on a plane (see below). Your respiratory nurse at the hospital may be able to help you with this. If you don't have one, you may want to buy a portable one to use when you're out and about.
- Organise a 'Fitness to Fly' test if needed (see below).
- Contact the airline about using your nebuliser during the flight if needed (see below).
- Organise oxygen with the airline for the flight if needed (see below).
- Arrange for assistance at the airport if needed (see below).

Fitness to fly

Medical advice to people with asthma on their fitness to fly is based on the severity of their condition and an assessment of their tolerance to the cabin altitude and oxygen levels. As a rough guide, if you are unable to walk for 50 metres without feeling breathless or needing to stop, you may not be able to cope with reduced cabin pressure.

It is up to your GP as to whether they charge you for this service.

You may be referred for a 'hypoxic challenge' test. This will predict how well you would be able to cope with the conditions in an aircraft cabin, and advise whether you need in flight oxygen. Your doctor or asthma nurse will know how to refer you.

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Nebulisers on planes

Most airlines will not permit medical equipment such as nebulisers to be used on board which require a mains supply but will accept the use of battery operated ones. If you need to use a nebuliser during the flight you must contact the airline to get permission to do so. Some airlines require printed information on the flight safety of the device. This can be obtained from the manufacturer. You will not be able to use a nebuliser during take off and landing. Using an inhaler with a spacer could be an alternative for you – check with your respiratory nurse at the hospital.

More information about nebulisers including where you can purchase a portable one is available in the factfile *Nebulisers and Asthma* which can be downloaded from the Asthma UK website.

In flight oxygen

If tests show that your usual blood oxygen levels are so low that air travel may be a problem for you, you may still be able to travel by air, if oxygen is provided for you. Airlines can arrange extra oxygen, but remember that most will charge. Different airlines have different charges; check with each one before you arrange your flight. Arrangements for oxygen must be made by you or your travel agent if possible when booking your ticket, but at least one month before your trip. Do not assume that planes will have oxygen on board. They carry emergency supplies but not enough for several hours.

Assistance at the airport

New European regulations guarantee rights for people who are disabled or have mobility difficulties. The airport authorities have a responsibility to provide assistance at the airport and the airline you are travelling with has responsibility when you are on board the aircraft.

Even if you are fairly mobile, there can be long distances to walk within airports and you may wish to consider taking the help available to you. If you are unable to climb the stairs into the aircraft there are lifts available to assist you.

You need to inform the airline of your needs at least 48 hours before you fly to ensure you receive the help you require. Be sure to book assistance for both of you if you have a carer or someone travelling with you so you can stay together. Airports have help points located in various locations from where you can call for help even if you have not pre-arranged it. Help carrying luggage can be provided free of charge for reasonable amounts of luggage. You can check on each airport's website or telephone for details, but help points are usually located

- in long and short stay car parks
- on departure drop off zones
- within the terminal itself, in stations, baggage reclaim halls and along some routes where there are long walking distances.



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Where can I get more information?

More information about help available to you at airports can be found at:
equalityhumanrights.com/airtravel
airportguides.co.uk

Information on travel insurance, nebulisers and the European Health Insurance card is available on the travel section of the Asthma UK website.



Asthma UK Adviceline

Ask an asthma
nurse specialist

0800 121 62 44

Asthma UK website

Read the latest independent
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asthma.org.uk

Asthma UK publications

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