



# British Lung Foundation

## Air travel with a lung condition

### Why does air travel affect people with lung conditions?

A small number of people with severe lung conditions may have difficulties travelling by air. This is because of the reduced air pressure in aircraft cabins.

People who have had infectious TB must not travel by air until shown to be non-infectious.

Anyone who has had a collapsed lung (pneumothorax) must not travel by air until their doctor tells them it is safe to do so.

### Why does the lower pressure in aircraft cabins affect people with lung conditions?

Air pressure in an aircraft cabin is lower than air pressure at ground level. Being in an aircraft cabin is like being at 6000 to 8000 feet on a mountain. At high altitudes blood oxygen levels fall in everyone and some people may feel a little breathless. In most people this has no health effect. But if you already have low blood oxygen levels because of your lung condition, then the extra dip that happens while you are in the plane can cause much more breathlessness and discomfort.

### How do I know if I might have difficulty travelling by air?

If you can walk 100 metres without needing oxygen, at a steady pace, without feeling breathless or needing to stop, it is unlikely you will be troubled by the reduced pressure in aircraft cabins. If you cannot do this, you will need to talk to your doctor about whether you should travel by air. You may need to have some breathing tests. These will show if a fall in your blood oxygen level is likely to be a problem for you while travelling by air.

You should also visit your doctor before travelling if:

- you have had health problems when flying in the past
- have been in hospital recently with a lung or heart problem
- you have ever suffered from a clot in your leg, veins or lungs.

### Can I use oxygen to help me when travelling by air?

Yes. 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 for providing oxygen. Different airlines have different charges; check with each one before you arrange your flight.

Arrangements for oxygen must be made by your travel agent usually when booking your ticket, but at least one month before your trip. Don't trust to luck that planes will have oxygen on board. They carry emergency supplies but not enough for several hours.

You need permission from the airline to take on board and use any electrical equipment, such as a nebuliser, that you may need for your treatment. Equipment must be battery

driven, and you will not be allowed to use it during take-off or landing. Using an inhaler with a spacer is just as effective as using a nebuliser.

### **Does the length of the flight make a difference?**

Longer flights can carry health risks for anyone, because of the health effects of long periods sitting without much exercise. There is no evidence of extra risk for people with a lung condition, except for people with lung cancer who are more prone to DVT (clots in the veins).

### **What happens if I get a chest infection while on holiday?**

Any chest infection should be completely treated before you fly home. You should have medical approval before flying home.

### **Am I covered by medical insurance for any delays or difficulties due to my chest condition whilst on my trip?**

You may not be. Check your travel insurance policy. Make sure you are fully covered for any medical costs that arise in connection with your lung condition. It is important that your travel medical insurance includes the cost of return by air ambulance if you were to become too ill to return on a commercial flight. Some policies exclude costs from "pre-existing" health conditions. Many policies will not cover you for costs from your lung condition unless you have a written note from your doctor that he or she feels you are fit to fly.

### **What else should I remember before flying?**

1. Ask your doctor well in advance for a letter to take in your hand luggage with details of your condition and medication
2. Be sure to take your inhalers and any other medication you may need in your carry-on bags. One of the most common problems is that people pack their inhalers in the luggage that goes into the hold
3. If you get breathless when walking, make sure you have help at airports
4. Distances to departure gates can be long. Disabled assistance at airports can be arranged before you travel
5. When you are in the aeroplane try to move about every hour or so and exercise your legs. Sitting for too long can lead to blood clots in the legs
6. Drink plenty of water and non-alcoholic drinks during the flight
7. Remember the golden rule: If in doubt about travelling, check with your doctor.

### **Further information**

**Frequent Travellers** - FREMEC, the Frequent Traveller's Medical Card, contains important medical information for care, replacing forms otherwise necessary for every flight. Once you have registered the reservations office has your travel requirements on record so that special assistance can be arranged when you fly. The period of validity is dependent on the nature of the symptoms. FREMEC is issued by many airlines but if you fly with an airline other than that which issued your FREMEC card you should check its validity with the new airline.

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