

Travelling with Pulmonary Hypertension

People with pulmonary hypertension need to plan their travels carefully, especially if airplane flights are required. Here is some information and tips to help make your travel seamless and comfortable.

Before you go

Talk to your health care team about all travel plans as early as you can, no matter how brief the trip. You need to make sure your health is stable enough for travel, and your specialty pharmacy will need to know when and where to ship your supplies.

If you are planning air travel or travel to a high-altitude city, you may require a careful pre-trip assessment, including high-altitude simulation testing, to determine how your body handles low-oxygen conditions.

Ask your health care team to help you find the closest pulmonary hypertension centre to where you will be staying, in case of an emergency during your trip.

Calculate how much of your trip's cost would be non-refundable if you had to cancel and decide whether to purchase cancellation insurance.

Gather your documents

Documents to keep with you in your carry-on luggage:

- A letter from your doctor stating that you can travel safely and can operate any medical equipment you may require (infusion pumps, portable oxygen concentrators, CPAP machines, etc.).
- A copy of your [Air Travel Requirements Assessment Form](#) to show Security and Customs officials, if needed. It provides not only a medical history but also a list of the medications and equipment you are taking/carrying with you, including infusion pumps.
- A list of your emergency contact phone numbers. This list should include a list of your doctors (including your pulmonary hypertension specialist) and your next of kin.
- Copies of your prescriptions, including your oxygen prescription if you use supplemental oxygen.
- Contact information for the oxygen supply company in your hometown and in all the places you are visiting.
- If you have a portable oxygen concentrator, carry a copy of the owner's manual. If you are travelling internationally, a manual in multiple languages can be a great asset if security asks



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questions and you don't share a language.

- If you have a service dog, ensure you carry its proper credentials and veterinarian paperwork. Requirements differ depending on your destination and your airline, bus, or train authorities, and can be substantial, so check well in advance.

Prepare for the journey

Travelling raises the risk of contracting a contagious illness, especially during the winter months, when most respiratory viruses thrive. **Wash or sanitize your hands often** and consider wearing an N95 mask, if possible.

- Carry adequate supplies of prescribed medicine in your **carry-on** luggage. Consider carrying extra supplies in case of travel delays.
- If you are flying with lithium batteries, keep them in your **carry-on** luggage. Always keep an extra battery beside you or at your feet, easily accessible even if you are not permitted to leave your seat or stand up.
- During travel:
 - Consider wearing compression stockings
 - Pass on the alcohol
 - Exercise your legs and feet whenever you can to help prevent blood clots.
- If there is meal service, explore the selection of special meals available for pre-order. Canadian airlines no longer offer low-sodium options, but Via Rail does (in Business class), and other special meals may suit your nutritional needs. Order a few days before you travel.
- Order a wheelchair for each airport or train station you will travel through, potentially including curbside assistance and gate-to-gate transportation at any layovers. This can be done at any time. Walking distances within airports and train stations can be very long and security, immigration and customs lines are often quite long and slow. If you are sitting comfortably in a wheelchair, you can handle such lines with less stress.

Travelling with supplemental oxygen

Once your doctor clears you to travel, contact the transportation provider to determine their policies on portable oxygen.

Talk to your local oxygen provider and ask for help to plan oxygen for your entire trip. They will review your oxygen prescription and travel plans and calculate how much oxygen you will need.



Your oxygen supplier will have to consider:

- The oxygen rate you are prescribed (you may use a higher rate if you are flying)
- The time it will take to get through any security areas
- Total time you will be on the plane, train, or cruise ship
- Stopover time
- Possible delays.

Ask your oxygen supplier to ensure you have an oxygen supply waiting for you at your destination. If your supplier doesn't supply oxygen at your destination, they may be able to tell you about a company that does. You may need to arrange for a separate oxygen supply for use in your departure location, any stopover locations, and your arrival location. For each, determine whether you need to supply your own nasal cannula or any other supplies.

Always prepare for the unexpected, such as delays or unplanned layovers. What will you do for oxygen if your trip is longer than expected? Will the battery life for your equipment last long enough? How will you recharge batteries if you have cancellations or unexpected delays? If you plan ahead, you'll have enough oxygen to stay safe and healthy.

Air travel

Air travel and travelling to high-altitude cities pose a concern because hypoxia (oxygen depletion) at high altitude can trigger narrowing of pulmonary blood vessels and cause further increases in pulmonary artery pressure. You may need extra oxygen while travelling, or you may need supplemental oxygen while travelling, even if you do not otherwise use it.

Different airlines have different rules about oxygen, and these rules can vary by destination. You may be able to supply your own oxygen tanks or portable oxygen concentrators, or rent them from the airline.

Before you book any flights, learn about the rules for oxygen on that particular flight on that particular airline. Allow at least a few days to talk with the airline and let them know that you require oxygen on a particular flight. Don't book your flight until you have arranged your oxygen supply.

Make sure you get answers to these questions from the airline:

- What are your rules about using medical oxygen? Can you show me a written policy?
- Can I bring my own oxygen tank? If so, what are the rules?
- Do you supply medical oxygen? If so, what is the cost?
- Can I carry a portable oxygen concentrator? If so, what are the rules? What sizes and



brands are allowed?

- Can I bring oxygen tanks? How many tanks can I bring?
- Do I need a physician's statement proving my medical need for this device?
- Will you provide emergency oxygen if I need it?
- How much advance notice do I need to give you that I require oxygen?
- What's your company policy on batteries in carry-on luggage?
- Can I bring other medical devices, like a humidifier?
- What is the security procedure for medical oxygen?
- What is the airport procedure for medical oxygen?

Airline-specific information about flying with supplemental oxygen:

- [Air Canada](#)
- [Westjet](#)
- [Porter Airlines](#)
- [Air Transat](#)

Cruises

Most cruise lines allow portable oxygen concentrators and oxygen tanks onboard, although they may require substantial advance notice (30 days or more). Consider your oxygen needs for any shore excursions and airport transfers, as well as onboard.

Cruise line-specific information:

- [Royal Caribbean](#)
- [Norwegian](#)
- [Holland America](#)
- [Disney](#)
- [Celebrity](#)
- [MSC](#)

Train travel

You will need to notify the rail company that you are travelling with oxygen. You will probably need to provide your own oxygen tanks and/or portable oxygen concentrators. If you need oxygen tanks replaced or refilled, you can arrange to do so where the train stops.

Information for North American rail lines:

- [Via Rail](#)
- [Amtrak](#)



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Travelling with an infusion pump

Keeping medications cold requires planning.

- Consider using a wheeled backpack or small cooler for ice packs and medications. Small ice packs last for about 6 hours.
- Airlines, hotels, and restaurants will keep ice packs in their freezer for you.
- Hotels can usually supply a refrigerator with a small freezer section.

Carry a backup pump and at least 2 days (discuss the number of days with your health care team) of extra supplies. Consider carrying a 3rd pump as extra backup—this may require a special arrangement with your pump provider.

Nutrition while travelling

Limit fluids

Remember to limit fluid intake (1.5 liters-2 litres of **all** fluids per day) if fluid restrictions are required as part of your normal routine.

Minimize sodium

Snacks

Avoid pre-packaged snacks that are high in sodium. Whole fruit and unsalted nuts are a great snack during the day.

If you purchase pre-packaged foods, read the nutrition labels to understand their sodium content. First, look at the ingredient list. MSG, baking soda, baking powder, disodium phosphate, sodium alginate, and sodium nitrate all represent sodium. Second, look at the sodium percentage on the nutrition label. Choose foods that represent less than 10% of your daily recommended value of sodium.

Restaurants

Ask a lot of questions to understand how food is prepared. Ask about spices, rubs, marinades, dressings and finishing sauces. All of these can be high in sodium.

Go local

When dining out, look for locally owned restaurants. Food is more likely to be prepared to order, which may make it easier for them to accommodate low-sodium requests.



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Keep it simple

Opt for entrees that are grilled, baked, or roasted. The more complicated a dish, the more likely that its sodium content is high. Avoid casseroles, pot pies and other dishes that have a lot of “mystery” ingredients.

When it comes to side dishes, choose fruits and vegetables that are prepared simply, such as steamed vegetables with no sauce. Ask for lemon to season vegetables (it is great on steamed broccoli!).

Avoid salty foods

Avoiding foods such as cheese, olives, pickles, cured or smoked meats, and deli meat will help to keep sodium intake down.

Ask for dressings, sauces and condiments on the side

All of these are high in sodium. Ask for any and all sauces to be served on the side and lightly dip your fork into the sauce before spearing your food. Steak, teriyaki and barbecue sauces, as well as ketchup, are high in sugar and sodium. If you use them, do so sparingly.

Travel resources

Air Travel Requirements Assessment Form

Air Canada, Air Transat, and WestJet all use the [Air Travel Requirements Assessment Form](#).

It has one section you must complete, and another section your healthcare provider must complete. It covers oxygen needs and the need for a personal attendant, among other things, and should be submitted to the airline at least 48 hours before you fly.

One thing to note is that once you are approved for an attendant, you *must* always travel with an attendant on that airline.

Special fares for personal attendants

[WestJet may provide seating at no charge for the companion or caregiver of a pulmonary hypertension patient.](#) [Air Canada offers a similar discount](#) for one personal support person. Pulmonary hypertension patient Dianne Gale can vouch for WestJet’s personal attendant accommodation:

"When we travelled to Toronto (for surgery), we used WestJet. I applied & received a companion fare: WestJet gives them to individuals who cannot travel alone. I got it because I couldn't manage my oxygen by myself. Alf went for free,



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so we just paid for my flight each way. Westjet gives you a number, and once you have been approved, you use that number whenever you book. They granted me companion seat privileges permanently."

Easter Seals offers a [Disability Travel Card](#). When a cardholder presents the Disability Travel Card when purchasing a **Via Rail ticket**, one support person can accompany them at a reduced fare.

Easter Seals also offers a low-cost [Access 2 card](#) program. An Access 2 card allows a support person free admission at any of over 500 Canadian movie theatres, cultural attractions, entertainment venues, and recreation facilities. The cardholder pays regular admission.

Enjoy safe, healthy, and happy travels!



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