

NEWS RELEASE - AUGUST 2008

Your Rights to Fly

what you need to know



A step by step guide for disabled and less mobile passengers

Under new European law, if you are disabled or have difficulty moving around you have rights to assistance when you fly to and from Europe.

You do not need to be permanently or physically disabled to benefit from these rights. In fact, anyone who has difficulty moving around, for example because of their disability, age or a temporary injury, can receive help when they fly.

This short guide gives you an overview of your rights and explains what you can do to ensure your journey runs smoothly from start to finish.

To find out more, please visit www.equalityhumanrights.com/airtravel.

You will see the term 'persons with reduced mobility' used at some airlines and airports across Great Britain. This is the legal term used to define airline passengers who find it difficult to move around easily because of factors such as disability or age.

Step One

Before you travel, consider the kind of assistance you may need.

Airports, airlines, tour operators and travel agents must provide clear and easy to use information and consider the need to provide information to customers in other formats such as large print and audio. Websites should also be accessible for all users.

Airline Safety

Airline safety rules must always be available to the public and can be found on airline websites or by contacting them.

In most cases, these rules state that anyone unable to fasten their seatbelt, leave their seat and reach an emergency exit unaided should be accompanied. This is also the same for passengers who need help with breathing, feeding, using the toilet, or taking medication.

On smaller aircraft, there may be lawful but realistic restrictions on the number of disabled passengers who can travel.

Airlines can only refuse a booking from a disabled or less mobile passenger if accepting it would break safety rules or if the size of the aircraft or its doors makes boarding or carriage physically impossible. If a booking is refused, the airline or its agent must inform you of the reasons why.

Step Two - Booking Your Flight

When you book, always tell your airline, travel agent or tour operator if you need assistance when you travel.

Assistance should be requested no later than 48 hours in advance but if shorter notice or no notice at all is given, reasonable efforts must still be made to assist you.

You may book your flight by telephone, face-to-face or online.

When booking online, it is sometimes not possible to explain your assistance needs and you may need to contact the airline, tour operator or your agent separately. You should not be charged for this.

Remember that booking staff may not automatically ask whether you need help so you may have to prompt them and ensure they clearly understand what your needs are.

Ask for pre-booked assistance to be confirmed in writing on the ticket or itinerary. This will help you to make a complaint if you do not receive the correct assistance.

Medical Clearance

You must provide medical clearance if your health could be affected when you fly. Passengers with a permanent and stable disability do not require this and you should not be asked for medical clearance to prove you need help.

If it is necessary for you to carry liquid medicines or medical equipment in your hand luggage, please remember to bring a letter from your doctor so you are not prevented from bringing these through the security area. Your doctor may charge you for this letter.

Step Three - Arriving at the Airport

Find out more about layout and facilities at your chosen airport in advance via their website or by contacting them directly.

Airports must have help points. You can find these at terminal entrances, at railway or bus interchanges and in car parks.

If you have requested assistance, this information will have been passed onto the airport. On arrival, you should go to a designated help point or to the check-in desk at the time specified by your airline.

If you arrive by public transport, the station or transport operator may be able to help you get to and from a terminal, and you will often find designated help points close by.

For security reasons, you cannot park outside terminals. Therefore, please use the nearest car park or drop-off point. Airport car parks should have spaces for Blue Badge holders and a help point - airports may also provide spaces for passengers requiring special assistance who are not Blue Badge holders.

Pedestrian access should be well signed and fully accessible to all users.

Step Four - Checking in

Remember to confirm any pre-booked assistance when you check in.

If you check-in electronically in advance, you should be able to confirm the assistance you require and select the most appropriate seat.

If you check in at a self service desk, staff should be available to help you.

If you use a wheelchair, you may be allowed to stay in your own chair to the gate depending upon the type or severity of your disability and if your wheelchair can be loaded at the gate. If not, your wheelchair will then be checked in and you will be transferred to an airport wheelchair suitable for your individual needs.

Security checks are made on all passengers and baggage, including disability equipment and mobility aids. Security staff should be aware of your needs and carry out searches sensitively.

Mobility Equipment

You can take up to two items of mobility equipment with you. Airlines are not required to compensate you in full if this equipment is lost or damaged so consider separate insurance cover.

Always check beforehand if there are any safety or security restrictions on certain medical equipment such as oxygen cylinders.

Step five - Moving through the Airport

Airports are responsible for providing assistance to disabled and less mobile passengers to get you to your flight. This includes, for example, checking in and going through security. You must not be charged for this assistance.

The services and facilities at an airport are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. This means that signage should be clear and there should be additional services or facilities such as accessible toilets, text-phones, low-level telephones and induction loops.

Reserved seating areas should be available for disabled passengers and passengers who have difficulty moving around. These should be clearly sign-posted and will often be close to a help desk, information screens and accessible toilets.

Airports must provide accessible flight information. Visual displays should be designed and positioned in a way that can be read easily by people with visual impairments and those in wheelchairs.

Some airports no longer make public announcements. If you can't read flight information on the screens provided, staff should make sure you are kept informed.

Using the Toilet in Airports

Airport or airline staff must help you to get to toilet facilities before, during and after your flight but are not required to provide personal assistance in bathrooms.

Step Six - Boarding the Flight

Disabled and less mobile passengers who have difficulty moving around will normally be called for boarding first. If you are unable to climb stairs, the way you will board will depend on the situation and equipment used.

If the aircraft is alongside the terminal building and an air-bridge is used, this provides level access into the cabin.

If you cannot walk to your seat you will need to transfer to a wheelchair used for this purpose. You may need to transfer by bus. These buses will normally have a low floor to allow easy boarding.

Many airports will use scissor lifts (often known as 'ambulifts') which allow level access to the aircraft door.

When boarding smaller aircraft, it is more common for stair climbers or boarding chairs to be used.

Staff Training

All staff dealing with the travelling public at airports or on planes must have disability awareness training. Some staff, such as those employed to provide direct assistance, will have more specialist training. However, this does not mean that staff will be experts in all types of disability or in using disability equipment. They will need you to tell them how they can best meet your needs and must then make all reasonable efforts to do so.

Step Seven - On Board

Moving around on an aircraft can be difficult because of limited space.

Wheelchairs cannot always be fixed securely in the cabin so will usually be stored in the hold. If you have a powered wheelchair, check before flying that the battery is a dry cell type. It may be helpful to put a note on your wheelchair explaining how it works.

Airlines must make all reasonable efforts to arrange suitable seating for you. This includes doing their best to ensure the person travelling with you is seated next to you.

On Board Information

Newer aircraft are more likely to have better access and to include features such as improved signage, lighting and materials and some wide-bodied airplanes have accessible toilets.

Airlines must communicate essential flight information accessibly to all passengers throughout your journey. If you need a personal briefing in a particular format, tell the cabin crew.

Your Seat

If you are allocated a seat before you fly, airlines should allow you to pre-book the most appropriate seat. If seats are allocated at check-in, staff will advise you on the most appropriate seat, such as one that allows you to move around, has moveable arm rests or greater foot space.

For safety reasons, if you have difficulty moving around, you cannot sit in seats where you may obstruct access to emergency equipment or impede the emergency evacuation of the aircraft. This includes any rows next to a door or emergency exit, which are often the seats with extra 'legroom'.

Seats with extra legroom are always in demand and are usually allocated on a 'first come first served' basis. Priority should be given to disabled passengers and anyone who has difficulty moving around but you must explain what you need.

Occasionally a disabled or less mobile passenger may need more than one seat to meet their needs. Airlines will generally charge for extra seats but may offer a discount.

Dogs

Assistance or guide dogs are allowed in the cabin without charge on approved routes. Larger dogs will normally sit on the floor while lighter dogs can be carried in the owner's lap. However, under the UK Pet Travel Scheme, dogs are only allowed to enter the UK on certain routes so remember to check the route you wish to fly beforehand. See our website for further details.

Step Eight - Leaving the Plane

If you require assistance, you will usually be the last to leave as it is easier to move around in an empty cabin. However, if you need to leave quickly, to catch another flight for example, you should request this.

Wherever possible, your mobility equipment should be made available to you shortly after leaving the aircraft. If equipment is lost or damaged, the airport is legally required to provide a temporary replacement, though this will not necessarily be on a like-for-like basis.

Airport staff must help you to collect your baggage, complete immigration and customs procedures, reach connecting flights or go to the next part of your journey. This includes airport car parks.

Further Information

The air travel industry is working hard to meet its obligations under the new law. For more information, please visit the Department for Transport website at www.dft.gov.uk.

It is important to tell your airline, airport, booking agent or flight operator straight away if you have any problems receiving help. If you are not satisfied with the response or you wish to complain about a breach of the law, the Equality and Human Rights Commission can advise you on how to do this.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission deals with complaints about UK airlines and airports in England, Scotland and Wales. If you are based in Northern Ireland, please contact the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI). If the problem originated outside the UK or on a foreign airline in Europe, please contact us for advice.

Contact details for relevant organisations can be found on our website.

About this Guide

Please note this guidance only applies to complaints related to disability or reduced mobility. If you have any other air travel complaints, please contact the Air Transport Users Council. Details can be found on our website.

You can find more information about your rights, including a list of frequently asked questions, on our website at www.equalityhumanrights.com/airtravel or by contacting your nearest helpline

Contact the Equality and Human Rights Commission

You can find out more or get in touch with us via our website at www.equalityhumanrights.com or by contacting one of our helplines.

Equality and Human Rights Commission helpline - England

Telephone: 08456 046 610

Textphone: 08456 046 620

Fax: 08456 046 630

9am-5pm, Monday to Friday, except Wednesday 9am-8pm

Equality and Human Rights Commission helpline - Wales

Telephone: 08456 048 810

Textphone: 08456 048 820

Fax: 08456 048 830

9am-5pm, Monday to Friday, except Wednesday 9am-8pm

Equality and Human Rights Commission helpline - Scotland

Telephone: 08456 045 510

Textphone: 08456 045 520

Fax: 08456 045 530

9am-5pm, Monday to Friday, except Wednesday 9am-8pm

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