

# Aerospace Medical Association

## Medical Guidelines for Airline Travel

### Airline Special Services

Anthony D. Evans, MBChB  
Claude Thibeault, MD

The treating physician should advise its patients in need of special services to contact the airline well before travel to find out if the required services will be available. Examples of special services that may be available are: special meals, wheelchairs in the terminal, wheelchair on board, early and assisted boarding, supplemental oxygen, stretchers, etc. It can be a challenge to ensure that the required services are available throughout a journey, especially when this involves different airlines and different aircraft types. When multiple flights (sectors) are involved, it is often helpful to book all flights, when possible, with one airline, as trips involving more than one airline pose an additional complication. It cannot be assumed that an airline medical department will liaise with another airline's medical department when considering transport of passengers with special needs. Many airlines are now part of groups, or 'alliances', and are able to arrange trips involving sectors operated by two or more airlines within the alliance. In these circumstances the different airline reservations departments do liaise with each other and this will usually include special services and medical clearance arrangements.

As more passengers use air travel for business or leisure purposes, a growing demand for in-flight supplemental oxygen can be expected. Airlines carry a limited supply of oxygen for use in the event of an unexpected in-flight emergency or unscheduled medical need only. This supply is not intended for use by passengers whose need for oxygen can be predicted before flight. If a traveler will need oxygen through the flight, advance arrangements must be made with the airline(s).

The availability and costs of supplemental oxygen vary from airline to airline worldwide, each being subject to its own national regulations and company policies. Hence, passengers who require oxygen should contact the airline as far in advance of their journey as possible in order to make proper arrangements. Passengers should be cautioned that those airlines that do provide oxygen usually only do so in-flight. Therefore, a traveler cannot always count on having oxygen continuously available from point of origin to destination. If oxygen is required in the airport pre-flight, while waiting for connections, or on arrival, arrangements should be made with oxygen vendors/service providers.

For safety and security reasons, some countries and/or some airlines prohibit passengers from bringing onboard their own gaseous oxygen supply procured from an outside source. In this case passengers are required to use the oxygen provided by the airline. However, more and more

airlines will accept passengers' oxygen concentrators. In most cases, these concentrators will have to be battery operated, as a suitable power source on board is not reliably available. The airline rules should be checked in advance.

With respect to use of stretchers for ill passengers, each airline has its own policy. Those that provide this service will require the purchase of several seats (the number of seats usually varies with the aircraft type and the airline) and that an attendant travel with the passenger. Airlines that carry stretchers normally have their own, but there are exceptions. Again, early contact with the airline is helpful.