

Flying in a Wheelchair

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As a Peer Support Officer at SCIA, people often ask me how I travel on a plane. I have been lucky enough to travel a lot I want to start by saying, the more information you can provide to airline and airport staff, the better your flight experience will be.

1) Before you go - Make sure you are medically cleared to fly. Some airlines have a medical clearance form that you will need to have signed off by your treating doctor. This also ensures your safety whilst on board. Also check that you are able to fly by yourself if need be - there is nothing worse than being at the check in desk and being told that you are unable to board your booked flight without a carer.

2) When you book - Just because you are in a chair doesn't mean you can't find a bargain! Once you have booked your trip, I would give the airline a call and let them know a few extra things that they need to be aware of, such as – your disability level; type of chair you travel in (manual or power); chair dimensions (if you know these), and chair weight.

3) Checking in - On the day of travel, ensure you give yourself plenty of time to arrive at the airport. This will not only reduce your own stress level, but will give plenty of time and notice to the ground crew. When I check in, I make sure the aisle seat I have booked has an arm rest that can be lifted up – this makes transfers into the seat a lot easier. I also ensure the seat next to me is free – so no other passengers are climbing over me to access their seat or the aisle. Sometimes however, flights are full so you may run into this issue. The crew however, will try their best to ensure that you're not too inconvenienced. Also be sure if you require assistance transferring that you inform staff now, whether it be a manual two person lift or if you require the 'Eagle Hoist lift' to transfer from your chair to the seat. I can't stress this enough as if you wait till the gate to ask you'll more than likely be holding up the flight.

4) At the gate - As we require help getting on the flight, we are always amongst the first passengers to board and the last to disembark. This is a great thing as it again eliminates any stress or pressure you may feel transferring into and out of the seat, especially if you are not too confident. Depending on the airline and aircraft size, there are a few different hoists/lifts/chairs that are used to get you on and off the plane. I have personally experienced both the Eagle Hoist Lift and the Washington Seat. With the Eagle Hoist, the ground crew will be able to totally assist you once at the door. The Washington Seat is a small thinner wheelchair that can easily fit up and down the aisle. You transfer into this seat at the air bridge. It basically is the same width as the drink/food trolleys used whilst in flight. Once at your seat, I personally use my normal cushion, on top of the plane seat – reducing the risk of getting pressure sores but it's totally up to you.

5) Assistance whilst on the flight - The staff are more than willing usually to assist you where you need help with minor things; however, this excludes personal care/hygiene needs. If you require assistance with this, you will need to fly with either a carer or a friend that can help you out.

6) Personal care - If you are on a long haul flight, I'd suggest putting a catheter in and wearing a leg bag for the flight. Two reasons, one it eliminates the need of worrying about going to the toilet and two, you can connect a larger drainage bag to your normal day bag and be able to drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. I normally just put a larger drainage bag inside a shopping bag and have it sitting under my seat out of view and just empty it once I've reached my destination.

7) Upon your arrival - As I previously mentioned, the more information you provide to the people around you the smoother this process will be. Once you are back in your own chair and comfortable, you can start making your way to baggage claim. Again, if you require help with anything such as baggage collection, one of the airport staff will usually be more than happy to assist you.

If you have any other questions, feel free to contact the SCIA Peer Support team on 1800 819 775.