

Travelling abroad with your ventilator

The aim of this leaflet is to answer some of the questions you may have about travelling abroad by aeroplane.

Whilst families with children on ventilators are able to travel abroad, we would recommend that it is important to plan in advance, especially if you need to use either oxygen or ventilation on the aeroplane or in resort.

Please remember the information in this leaflet should be used as a guide, and will not apply to all patients in all circumstances.

Can I travel by air?

Many patients who use ventilators can travel safely by air. However for some, this may be a problem, this is because the air pressure in the cabin is lower than ground level, which means the oxygen levels in your blood will fall.

For people with a respiratory or cardiac condition this may cause complications such as breathlessness or discomfort, and they may require supplemental oxygen or increased respiratory support via their ventilator on the aircraft.

How do I know if my child is fit to fly?

It is essential you consult with your respiratory specialist to ascertain the level of risk involved and any recommendations they may have. Please let them know as soon as possible in case any investigations need to be booked.

This will include a clinical assessment called a "Fitness to Fly" test to ensure your child is safe to travel on an aeroplane, and ascertain what extra respiratory support they may need, such as supplemental oxygen whilst in flight.

The respiratory consultant will need to provide you with a letter confirming that your child is fit to fly and what extra support the child may need. A Medical Information Form (MEDIF) which is provided by the airline (and usually available on the airline's website) may also need to be completed by the respiratory consultant. Please check with the airline if this is required, and check as soon as possible to avoid delays.

Do I need to let the airline know?

You need to contact your airline as soon as you decide to go abroad. Often your tour operator will be able to provide you with the contact details. Different airlines have different rules regarding passengers with medical needs and the transport of medical equipment. The majority of airlines have a special services desk or page on their website. This will advise you what the requirements are, what forms they require, and anything else they consider relevant.

Do I need holiday insurance?

Holiday insurance is essential for both your child and their equipment. Often your tour operator will be able to facilitate this for you or there are specialist insurance companies who specialise in cover for children with medical conditions. Again, your tour operator or your respiratory team may have more information regarding this.

Please ensure that any travel medical insurance you take out includes the cost of returning by air ambulance if your child becomes too ill while abroad to return on a commercial flight.

If you are travelling within the European Economic Area and Switzerland it is advisable to obtain a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). If you are a UK resident, then the EHIC will entitle you to some treatment free or at a reduced cost when visiting a European Union (EU) country.

These can be applied for online via www.nhs.uk or www.gov.uk, or application forms can be obtained from the Post Office. There is no charge for applying for an EHIC and they can be beneficial for families whilst abroad.

Please remember an EHIC card is not a substitute for medical insurance. Medical insurance must be obtained prior to travel.

Travelling with oxygen/ventilation on an aeroplane

Oxygen on air flights or for use abroad is **not provided** by the NHS. On the

aeroplane the oxygen is often provided by the airline and the airline may charge for this.

Please remember that airlines will not provide supplemental oxygen in ground terminals, before or after the flight, if you require oxygen on the ground you need to arrange this separately.

Each airline has their own rules regarding oxygen and not all airlines will provide oxygen routinely. Some require families to provide their own oxygen on the flight and this would involve the family obtaining a rental device from a private supplier in the UK.

Most commercial airlines can only supply oxygen at the rate of between 2 or 4 litres per minute, if your child requires more oxygen than this they are usually considered to be unsuitable for air travel.

If you require oxygen routinely or require oxygen to be provided whilst you are on holiday you will still need to obtain a rental device from a private supplier in the UK, costs of this rental can vary dependent on the duration of the holiday and the amount of oxygen required. The equipment provided is usually a concentrator providing a maximum of 3 litres of oxygen, and an appropriate number of batteries to ensure the concentrator can run safely in case of a power failure.

There are a number of private oxygen suppliers in the UK who provide rental equipment for holiday use, and these can be easily found via the internet, or your respiratory specialist or oxygen provider may be able to assist you with finding one.

Using the ventilator on an aircraft

If you are planning to carry your device on a flight you must only do so as hand luggage. The machine is fragile medical equipment and must not be stored in a hold in case it is damaged.

If you are deemed highly dependent on the machine: i.e. you cannot risk having one night without your machine, you must have at least one spare ventilator and battery.

Ensure you have a letter from your respiratory consultant available stating it is medical equipment.

Carry a user manual for the ventilator to help security personnel/cabin crew to understand its purpose.

Ensure you have spare batteries with you as part of your hand luggage, most airlines require you to have adequate batteries to cover 150% of the flight and any delays. For example on a 10 hour flight, they would expect sufficient batteries to last for 15 hours.

Most ventilators are not suitable to be used with a humidifier system whilst on aircraft.

Not all ventilators are compatible with the AC or DC power source on an aeroplane, check with your airline or respiratory specialist **prior** to flight.

Ensure you have spare consumables on hand on the plane, such as extra mask, filters tubing etc. in case of breakage.

Most airlines will not allow use to use your ventilator during take-off or landing unless you are 24 hour ventilated or in an emergency situation

Travelling with other medical devices

If you use any other medical devices such as a cough assist device, nebuliser, humidifier or suction machine you will need to check with the individual manufacturer and airline regarding its carriage, its suitability and whether it is allowed to be used during a flight.

At time of writing, neither a cough assist machine nor a humidifier are eligible to be used on a flight, nebulisers and suction machines are allowed, but remember to check before you fly.

Most medical devices are fragile and it is likely they would need to be carried as hand luggage.

If you intend to take a wheelchair on the flight with you, please advise the airline as soon as possible. They may wish to know details of the wheelchair, such as the weight and does it require batteries.

If your child becomes ill on board the aircraft

- Advise a member of the airline staff to let them know your child feels unwell.
- Consider putting them on the ventilator if not already in using it.

- The airline does carry emergency oxygen which they could provide if needed.
- Cabin crew have the ability to contact emergency medical support and make a diversion before final destination if required.

While I am abroad

Mains power systems differ in terms of voltage worldwide. The majority of ventilators have an **internal converter** to ensure electrical supplies remain compatible with your ventilator. However check in the user's manual or with your respiratory team if you are unsure.

Remember to take an appropriate plug adaptor for the country you are travelling to.

In some countries the electrical supply may not be reliable, so ensure you have taken spare batteries with you.

Take an extension lead, as there may not be a convenient plug socket, for example, near your hotel bed.

It may be worth advising hotel front desk staff that you will be keeping a ventilator in the room and request it is not moved by hotel staff.

Ensure that you have taken enough spare supplies for your ventilator, including dust filters. Filters may have to be changed more frequently if there is higher humidity or the climate is arid or dusty.

Ensure you have a basic idea of where the local hospital is, and how you would access it if needed.

If your ventilator breaks while you are abroad:

You may be able to get assistance from the local hospital. This will depend on the expertise of the local hospital and local services. Ensure you take your ventilator, any documents/ contact details provided by your respiratory team in the UK, and your insurance certificate.

You may be able to contact your respiratory team in the UK for simple advice, however they will not be able to provide you with a replacement ventilator.

If you are deemed highly dependent on the machine: I:E you cannot risk having one night without your machine, you will have been provided with a spare ventilator and batteries, swap to this ventilator immediately but advise your respiratory team in the UK that you have had a ventilator failure as soon as possible.

If there is a power cut or you have problems with your power supply whilst in resort and your ventilator has internal battery capacity and spare battery capacity. Please remember the average life span of each battery is between 4-6 hours. This should provide adequate time to get to an alternative power supply or to contact the local hospital.

If you are very reliant on your ventilator (i.e. cannot have one night without using it) and it fails, always use the local hospital as a 'place of safety' and attend as soon as possible.

If in any doubt about your child's safety, call local emergency services.

What to do if my child becomes unwell when abroad?

Seek appropriate medical advice locally; resorts often have links to local doctors or walk in clinics.

If your child is admitted to hospital for any reason while abroad, you should take your ventilator with you into hospital. Also take all documents provided by your UK respiratory team describing both the reason for the ventilator and also the usual settings.

If your child gets a chest infection while abroad, this must be treated before you fly home

Your child should have medical approval before they fly home if they have suffered a chest infection while abroad.

Summary

Most children who use ventilators are able to safely travel abroad and take advantage of air travel.

Key points to remember include:

- Plan ahead
- Check with your respiratory specialist to ensure your child is fit to fly and if any further tests are required.
- Insurance for children with pre-existing medical conditions can be expensive. It is worth obtaining quotes early in the planning.
- Ensure you have advised the airline as well as the tour operator. Airlines may have their own forms and checklists to complete.
- Oxygen will need to be arranged privately by yourselves if your child requires it. This can also be an extra cost to the holiday.
- Ensure that you have all appropriate documentation, including ventilator prescription, care plan for child, ventilator service manual and insurance certificate.
- Always take your ventilator in your hand luggage.
- If you are deemed to be highly dependent on the ventilator you will need to take a spare ventilator and batteries
- Ensure you have enough spare consumables such as tubing, mask and filters in case anything breaks.
- May be advisable to advise the hotel/resort staff prior to departure regarding your child's ventilator requirements.
- Have a general idea of where the local hospital/emergency services are in relation to your hotel/accommodation
- Ensure you take appropriate travel power adaptors for the country you are travelling to.

References

- Aintree University Hospital (2014) "Travelling with your ventilator" leaflet
- Baywater healthcare (2018) "Holidays with Oxygen"
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- BTS guidelines (2011) Managing patients with stable respiratory disease planning air travel
- BTS quality standards (2014) respiratory management of children with NMW
- Guys and St. Thomas NHSFT (2016) "Air travel, a guide for Lane Fox Patients"
- Great Ormond Street RFU (2016) "FITNESS TO FLY ASSESSMENT" information leaflet
- Muscular dystrophy campaign (2014) Commercial air travel: a handbook for people with NMD
- South west neuromuscular ODN (2017) "Need to know, nice to know about breathing"
- Civil Aviation Authority (2018) "getting medical clearance to fly" webpage.