

Access to Air Travel

A guide for passengers
with a disability or
reduced mobility



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This publication is available in alternative formats on request.

Contact the Consumer Council 0800 121 6022 or
info@consumercouncil.org.uk

An audio version can be downloaded in mp3 format from
www.consumercouncil.org.uk

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to ensure the information provided in this guide is accurate and correct at the time of going to print but no legal responsibility is accepted for any errors, omissions or misleading statements.

Please note the information in this guide could be subject to change. You will be able to download an updated version from the Consumer Council's website:
www.consumercouncil.org.uk

Introduction

This guide provides information on the types of assistance passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are entitled to when travelling by air.

More detailed information is available by contacting the Consumer Council on 0800 121 6022 or info@consumercouncil.org.uk. We can talk to you about your specific requirements and advise you on what assistance you can expect from the airport and airline.

All airports and airlines in the European Union are required to provide assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. All disabilities are covered including hidden ones such as learning difficulties, autism and hearing loss. A passenger may have reduced mobility because of their age, an illness or a temporary disability, for example a broken arm or leg. The assistance is provided to ensure air travel is as convenient for passengers with a disability as it is for passengers without a disability.



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Key information

- You are entitled to assistance at all stages of your journey, right from the point of booking your ticket.
- The special assistance must be provided free of charge.
- You should request assistance at least 48 hours before you travel to ensure all assistance needed, including any relevant equipment, is available.
- An airline can only refuse a booking if the size of the plane or its doors prevents a person from boarding, or for safety reasons, for example, if a passenger who intends to travel alone is unable to fasten or unfasten their seatbelt unaided.



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What is special assistance?

Airlines and airports are required to offer help to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility at different stages of their journey. Examples of special assistance include helping passengers check in luggage, assisting passengers travel through the airport and helping passengers to board and disembark the plane.

Assistance will only be provided if you request it. The assistance you receive should be appropriate to your needs and must be provided free of charge.

Staff providing the assistance will have been trained to meet your specific needs.



Requesting assistance

If you require assistance when travelling you should inform the company you make your booking with. If you make your booking directly with an airline, the airline will pass details of your assistance needs on to your departure and arrival airports. If you book with a travel agent or tour operator, they are responsible for informing the airline and the airline will inform the departure and arrival airports of your assistance needs.

You will normally be able to request special assistance by telephone or by email. Each airline should have a low cost phone number for booking assistance and some offer a call back service.

You need to request special assistance at least 48 hours before travelling to guarantee that it is provided. It is usually easiest to do this at the time of booking.



If you do not request special assistance in advance, the airline and airport are still required to do their best to help you but you may have to wait longer for the assistance and specific equipment may not be available.

If you arrange your own flight connection by booking tickets with two different airlines, make sure you contact both airlines with information about the assistance you require.

If an airline refuses to allow you to travel alone because of safety reasons, for example, if you are unable to fasten or unfasten your seatbelt unaided, you may be required to travel with a companion who can provide you with personal assistance during the flight.

Before you fly

The airline can ask you for medical clearance if you have a medical condition that could require you to receive assistance during the flight to complete the journey safely. However, medical clearance forms are not required to prove your need for assistance. If you are unsure whether medical clearance is required you should check with your airline.

If you are travelling with liquid medication or medical equipment in your hand luggage make sure you have a doctor's letter confirming you need this.

If you need a wheelchair on board the plane to access toilet facilities, check whether the airline will provide you with one before you book your flight.



If you are travelling with electrical mobility equipment, make sure you provide the airline and airport with all the necessary details, for example, weight, battery type and dimensions.

If you have specific seating needs on board the plane, inform the airline before you travel. The airline has to make all reasonable efforts to give you a seat that meets your needs. However, passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are not allowed to sit in emergency exit rows.



Arriving at the airport

Airports provide help points in arrival areas, including terminal entrances, car parks, bus and rail stops. There will be an assistance desk, call button, intercom or telephone for you to announce your arrival.

If you were not given a specific arrival time by the airline or tour operator you should arrive no later than two hours before your flight departure time.

The special assistance you requested will be available from the point you notify the airport of your arrival. The assistance provided must meet your needs. For example, someone with a visual impairment may need a guide to escort them through the airport, while someone with mobility problems may need to use an airport wheelchair.



Check-in

At check-in you should confirm any pre-booked assistance. If required, special assistance staff will help you use self check-in facilities.



Security

Security screening is an important aspect of air travel and all passengers are required to process through security.

Airports have private areas where security screening can be conducted out of view of other passengers. If you would prefer for your security screening to be conducted in a private area, ask a member of security staff.

Flight information screens

If you have a disability that prevents you from using the flight information screens, the airport may make an announcement to explain when your gate is open and it is time to board the flight. However, some airports do not make announcements and instead will arrange for a member of assistance staff to notify you when it is time to board your flight.



Assistance around the airport

The assistance staff will help you reach your departure gate. If your departure gate has not been announced by the airport, assistance staff will bring you to a seating area or meeting point and then return to assist you once the departure gate has been announced.

Assistance staff will help you access toilet facilities but will not provide toileting assistance.

Assistance staff may be able to help you access shops or restaurants. However, staff are not required to wait while you shop or eat a meal. You can agree a time for the assistance staff member to come back and continue to assist you to the departure gate.



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Boarding the plane

Passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are often called to board the plane first.

How you board the plane will depend on the position of the plane and the equipment required for boarding. An air bridge may be used which allows level access from the boarding lounge onto the plane. If passengers have to board the plane from ground level the airport will use a special lift, stair climber, stair lift or boarding chair.



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Once you are on board the plane, if you are unable to walk to your seat, assistance staff will transfer you to a specialist aisle wheelchair which can be used on the plane. The aisle wheelchair is provided by airport assistance staff and may not be available during the flight.

Remember, if you need a wheelchair on board the flight to access toilet facilities, check that the airline will provide one before you book your flight.



On-board the plane

The airline is required to provide you with assistance on-board the plane.

This includes:

- Assistance in accessing the toilet, however staff will not provide toileting assistance;
- Providing you with safety information and information concerning flight delays in a range of accessible formats;
- Providing appropriate seating (remember to inform the airline before you travel if you have particular seating needs for example, you may need a seat with extra legroom); and
- Assistance in storing your baggage in the overhead lockers and in retrieving your baggage when you need it.

If you need any other type of assistance while on-board the flight, for example to use a medical device or assistance with eating, you will need to be accompanied by another person who can provide the assistance.

Disembarking

You will usually be the last to leave the plane as depending on your disability it could be easier for you to exit once the plane is empty. However, if you need to get off the plane quickly, for example if you have to catch a connecting flight, make sure you inform a member of staff.

The special assistance staff will help you get off the plane. If you did not contact the airline with details of your assistance needs at least 48 hours before the flight departure, the necessary equipment may not be available. However, the staff must do their best to meet your needs.

Your mobility equipment should be available shortly after you leave the plane but if any of your equipment is lost or damaged, the airport will try and facilitate you with a temporary replacement.



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Assistance at the destination airport

The staff at your destination airport should be provided with the details of your assistance requirements from your airline or tour operator.

The staff will:

- Assist you from the plane to the baggage claim area and will help you retrieve your baggage;
- Help you access toilet facilities;
- Accompany you through the immigration and customs procedures; and
- Take you to a designated point, which may be the airport car park, train or bus station or a connecting flight.



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Providing information in accessible formats and communicating with passengers

Airlines should provide services with appropriately trained staff, to allow passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to book air travel and request special assistance.

Airport assistance request points should include facilities for passengers who are deaf or have a hearing loss and passengers with a visual impairment to notify staff of their arrival and request assistance. You can request that a member of staff meets you and provides assistance from the point you arrive until you board the plane.

Airport assistance staff and airline staff should be trained to communicate with and assist passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

When you contact the airline to request special assistance you should state the nature of your disability and explain the type of assistance you require. For example, if you have a visual impairment you can request that a member of assistance staff guides you while you move through the airport and informs you when it is time to board your flight.

If you are deaf and use sign language you should inform the airline before you travel. There may not be any special assistance staff or airline staff members who are trained to use sign language. If this is the case you should enquire what methods the assistance staff and airline staff will use to communicate with passengers who are deaf.





While you are waiting to board the plane, information screens will display details concerning the gate you will board from and whether the flight has been delayed or cancelled. This information may also be announced over a public address system. If you are unable to hear public service announcements or read airport information screens, you can request that airport staff inform you when it is time to board the plane.

Seating areas reserved for passengers with a disability should be close to a staffed desk or to a designated assistance call point to enable you to request assistance. Assistance call point systems are designed to meet the needs of passengers with sensory impairments.

All essential information, including the airline security briefing, must be provided in a format accessible to passengers who are deaf or have a hearing loss and passengers with a visual impairment.

Mobility equipment

In addition to medical equipment you can carry up to two pieces of mobility equipment free of charge.

There is a limit of approximately £1,000 compensation for damaged mobility equipment. Therefore, make sure your travel insurance can cover the cost of any damage to your equipment.

If you are a wheelchair user, it may be possible to stay in your own wheelchair until the departure gate. This however will depend on whether your wheelchair can be loaded onto the plane at the gate. If this is not possible, your wheelchair will be checked in along with your luggage at the check-in desk and there you will be transferred to an airport wheelchair.

If you are travelling with electric mobility equipment, make sure you provide the airline with details of the equipment before you travel, for example, the weight and dimensions of the equipment and the battery type.

Travelling with an assistance dog

Your assistance dog can travel in the cabin with you free of charge.

Some airlines will transport containers and food free of charge, in addition to your normal baggage allowance. You should check with your airline to see what their policy is.

Make sure you have the necessary paperwork to identify your dog as a trained assistance dog. Before you travel you should check with the airline about the specific documents required for this.

If you are travelling on a service within the UK there are no restrictions on travelling with an assistance dog. If you are travelling to or from another EU country your assistance dog will be subject to animal health controls. You should check the latest government guidance before travelling.

Case Studies

These examples outline how passengers with a disability or reduced mobility can benefit by requesting special assistance. If your assistance needs are not reflected in the examples and you are unsure about what assistance is available please give us a call.



My name is Aubrey Bingham.

I travel by air frequently, taking approximately 10 or 12 flights a year. These journeys are a combination of work, leisure and holiday related trips.

I am a full-time wheelchair user and when travelling, it pays to plan ahead. When I book a flight, I contact the airline to request assistance. I explain to the airline that I will be bringing my own personal lightweight wheelchair and the only assistance I need is from the boarding gate to the

plane and then onto the plane. I also explain it is vital that my own wheelchair, not an airport wheelchair, is brought to the door of the plane or into the ambilift on arrival at my destination.

The assistance which airlines are legally required to provide has made a positive impact on air travel. I have particular praise for the two Belfast airports which both have very good assistance staff. I have mixed experiences of the assistance provided at the European airports I have travelled through. While some staff have been very helpful unfortunately others have been less attentive to my particular assistance needs. When poor service is provided it is important to raise a complaint with the airline or airport to ensure the problem is addressed and service is improved.

I would encourage everyone to travel and discover wondrous places and enjoy new experiences. While there may be a few hiccups along the way, this would often be the case regardless of whether the passenger is a person with a disability or a non-disabled person.



My name is Sue Benham.

I travel both for work and pleasure and fly approximately eight times a year. I have a profound hearing loss and I am a hearing aid user and lip reader.

When travelling I tell the airline staff at the check-in desk that I have a hearing loss. I explain that to enable me to lip read the staff should look at me when they are talking to me. I also explain that I cannot hear announcements made over the airport public address system. As I am unable to hear announcements concerning the order in which passengers should board, I request to be allowed to board along with the first group of passengers called for my flight.

My experiences of air travel have, on the whole, been very positive. I have found that when I explain to staff members that I have a hearing loss they are usually very willing to help me. Although I have encountered some problems in the past I recognise that difficulties can arise for hearing passengers as well as for passengers with a hearing loss and passengers who are deaf.



**My name is
Julia Patterson.**

Our son, Christian, is aged 8 and has ASD, ADHD and dyspraxia. Travelling by air with Christian is always challenging although he does enjoy the experience.

Christian has a hidden disability that is often not apparent to staff and other passengers.

The main issue for us when travelling is queues, especially around security. Christian doesn't understand why he has to queue; also he has no stranger danger awareness and often gets over stimulated by the noise around the airport and loud, unexpected public announcements causing him to bolt. This makes it very hard to get him to stay with us. However, since learning that we could request assistance having the extra pair of hands has been a huge help in keeping Christian safe in the busy environment of the airport.

After booking the special assistance with the airline in advance, we go straight to the special assistance desk at the airport when we arrive.

There we are assigned a member of staff to assist Christian.

They help us with checking in our bags and fast track us through security so queuing isn't a big issue anymore. Christian doesn't follow instructions well but the airport staff are patient with him and work with us to get him to slowly walk through the scanners.

We are taken to the food court and shopping area and stay there until our flight is ready to board. The assistance staff then return and escort us onto the aeroplane. The airline is accommodating when assigning us appropriate seats. Once on-board staff check we are ok.

While we've had very positive experiences using the special assistance services when flying from Northern Ireland airports we have found that sometimes there is not the same level of service at other European airports, even when flying with the same airline. I recognise the importance of raising the issue with the airline or airport in these instances to ensure that it is addressed and the service is improved.



**My name is
Gerard Shevlin.**

I have Down's Syndrome and a learning disability. I love to travel by air, especially when I'm going to visit my brother in England. I sometimes find it difficult to read the flight

departure screens at the airport. Although I stay relaxed, I understand that some people find the security search stressful.

I haven't requested special assistance before. I don't have any difficulty walking and can carry my own bags. However, I now know I can ask for a member of assistance staff to give me a hand to check-in and help me find my way through the airport. I would encourage anyone who needs assistance when travelling to request special assistance when booking their flight.

Complaints

If you are dissatisfied with the service provided by an airline or airport, you should raise the issue with a member of airline or airport staff immediately. This will allow the airline or airport to respond to your issue quickly and hopefully resolve it.

If you are still not satisfied with the assistance received, report your complaint to the management of the airline, airport or tour operator.

If you remain dissatisfied with the response provided, please do not hesitate to contact the Consumer Council. We have the power to investigate the matter on your behalf.

Alternatively, if you do not feel comfortable with raising the complaint with the airline or airport yourself you can contact the Consumer Council in the first instance.

Further advice

Contact the Consumer Council for advice if you have any questions about the type of assistance you need or if you are unsure how to request it.

You can contact the Consumer Council for more information or to make a complaint on 0800 121 6022 or complaints@consumercouncil.org.uk.



Floor 3, Seatem House
28 - 32 Alfred Street
Belfast
BT2 8EN



Complaints line: 0800 121 6022



Tele/Textphone: 028 9025 1600



Fax: 028 9025 1663



Email: info@consumercouncil.org.uk



Website: www.consumercouncil.org.uk



Consumer Council Northern Ireland



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