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Air Travel with Oxygen

Air travel poses special challenges to Alphas who use oxygen therapy. But, with a little advance planning, you'll have no problem.

What's tricky about air travel for Alphas?

As your airplane gains altitude, air pressure in the cabin decreases, and so does the amount of oxygen in the air. This isn't usually a problem for people without lung disease. But if you have decreased lung function, it puts you at risk of low-blood oxygen levels (*hypoxemia*).

Even if you only use [oxygen therapy](#) when you exercise or sleep, you may find that you need it for air travel. It may also help when you're visiting somewhere at a high altitude. Talk to your doctor to see what they recommend.

If you're [traveling with oxygen](#), you need to plan ahead. You should consult with your doctor well in advance of your trip. This gives you time to talk to your oxygen provider and make plans to ensure your oxygen needs are met before, during, and after your flight.

Understand airline-provided in-flight oxygen.

Unfortunately, the oxygen masks that drop down when cabin pressure falls aren't meant for oxygen therapy. You'll have to make other arrangements. In most cases, this means using in-flight oxygen provided by the airline.

The Federal Aviation Association (FAA) has [requirements for in-flight oxygen](#). You can only bring FAA-approved portable oxygen concentrators. Very few airlines provide their own oxygen cylinders and equipment anymore. You might find this option on some foreign carriers and when traveling overseas.

If you do find airline provided oxygen service, you will find the costs vary. Some smaller commuter airplanes don't provide the service at all. The cost of this service generally ranges from \$75 to \$150 per

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flight segment. Before you buy your airline ticket, inform the airline that you'll need oxygen therapy, and find out how much they charge for the service.

Plan ahead.

Most airlines require two weeks' notice to guarantee oxygen arrangements. But some need as little as 48 hours' notice. It's best to make your arrangements as far in advance as you can and to reconfirm these arrangements as your travel date draws closer.

Note: The airline will not supply oxygen for you to use while you're transferring between flights, getting your luggage, or waiting for a ride. If you need continuous flow oxygen therapy, you must arrange this with an oxygen service provider.

Traveling with a Portable Oxygen Concentrator (POC)

The FAA has approved the use of certain POCs for in-flight use. However, airlines have their own rules for their use. They may only allow a specific type, or they may not allow them at all.

Ask the airline about their POC policy before making your travel plans. If they do let you bring your own POC, you'll still need to notify them that you'll be doing so when you buy your ticket.

Bring a doctor's note.

If you're flying with a POC, you'll need a signed letter from your doctor to carry with you during your trip. Each airline requires its own form. You may be able to download a copy for the airline's website or call to get one. Once your doctor fills out the form and signs it, make a few copies to have just in case.

Most forms include:

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1. Your ability to respond appropriately to alarms
2. When you need to use your oxygen
3. Maximum flow rate under normal operating condition

Have a plan for powering your concentrator.

Get to the airport early, as security will need to check your concentrator. Some planes have outlets on board, but you can't count on this. It's safer to bring batteries. Airlines may require you to bring enough batteries to power your POC for at least 150% of the expected maximum flight duration.

Tips for powering your POC:

- If you want to conserve power, you can plug it into an outlet at the gate. But remove the batteries before you plug in your POC. And make sure your AC power adaptor is the right type for the outlet.
- During takeoff and touch down, store your concentrator under the seat in front of you. You don't have to turn it off during takeoff and landing.

Prepare for overseas travel.

If you're flying overseas, you must check with the airline about traveling with your POC. Many airlines don't allow their use on overseas flights.

There may also be issues with electrical power when you travel overseas. In the U.S., we use 120 Volts with 60 HZ. Europe uses 220 Volts with 50 Hz. Your POC may overheat and shut down even if you're using the right kind of adaptor. Be sure to discuss this issue

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and other issues associated with overseas travel with your POCs manufacturer or supplier before you travel outside the U.S.

Think about your connecting flights.

If you have connecting flights, ask for a wheelchair with an attendant to help get you to the next leg of your trip. Riding instead of walking helps you conserve energy and reduce the stress of fighting your way through the airport.

Some larger airports have electric carts to shuttle you from gate to gate. Call the airport ahead of time and arrange to have a cart waiting for you at your gate.

Travel with a friend.

It's best to travel with a companion who's familiar with your oxygen system, so they can help you change batteries and silence alarms on your POC during the flight.

After the flight, your friend should also know how to:

- Change cylinders
- Open tanks
- Attach a new regulator
- Adjust the flow

Pack supplies for extra peace of mind.

Bring back-up supplies for any issues that may arise, including:

- Extra tubing
- Cannulas
- Adaptive pieces
- A tank wrench
- T-connectors
- Swivels
- Electric adaptors

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Pack these items in your carry-on luggage so you can access them quickly, and there's no chance of them getting lost.

Other concerns about air travel

Cabin air quality tends to be dry. This can increase your risk of getting an upper respiratory infection. So can sitting close to others during the flight.

Here are some simple steps to take to help reduce your risks when flying:

- Drink plenty of water to stay well-hydrated.
- Avoid coffee, tea, and alcohol. They dehydrate you.
- Ask to be reseated if you're near someone who is coughing, sneezing or appears to have a cold.
- Wear a mask to reduce your exposure to airborne droplets.
- Bring antibiotics in case you develop an infection while you're away from home.

Air travel may have its challenges, but none of them are impossible to overcome. Plan ahead, and then relax and enjoy the journey!

For more in-depth information on this topic, please visit the [Big Fat Reference Guide \(BFRG\)](#). If you are enrolled in AlphaNet's Subscriber Portal, you can access the BFRG [here](#).

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