

Air Travel Tips for Older Passengers

My son is getting his PhD next month and I would like to fly my parents in from across the country for his graduation, but I have some concerns about the flights. My dad is 82 years old, has trouble walking long distances and uses an oxygen tank for his COPD. What airport or airline services are available to help elderly passengers?

Flying across the country can be exhausting for anyone, but for individuals with health issues or physical limitations it can be extremely challenging. Here are a few flying tips and a number of resources that can help.

Booking: The best time to make special requests for your parents' flight is when you book. You may need to make these requests over the phone.

There are many requests you can make that will make the trip easier for your parents. For example, you may want to book preferred aisle seats in the front of the plane for easier access or bulkhead seats that provide extra leg room. You also may want to request wheelchairs with attendants to maneuver and accompany your parents through the airport. If your parents do not want wheelchairs, but need some assistance, ask about electric carts.

You also should check with the airline regarding their policy for oxygen units for your dad. While the Federal Aviation Administration prohibits the use of personal oxygen tanks during flights because they contain compressed gas or liquid oxygen, they do permit certain portable oxygen concentrators.

Getting to the airport: If your parents need help getting to the airport, there are various senior transportation options they may be able to use. To find out what is available in their area, visit the Rides in Sight website at RidesInSight.org.

Airport assistance: Most airports allow elderly fliers to be escorted to and from the gate by a non-traveling companion as long as they get a gate/escort pass, which is especially helpful if they are flying on their own. These passes can typically be obtained at the airline's check-in counter by showing a government-issued photo ID.

If no one is available to accompany your parents, find out if the airline can assist them when you call to book their flight. Some airlines offer special check-in and escort assistance to passengers who request it.

Alternatively, you may want to consider hiring an independent company, like Royal Airport Concierge Services, to meet your parents at the curb, check their bags, expedite all check-in and security processes, escort them to a VIP lounge and bring them to the aircraft gate when they are ready to board. Costs for these services typically range between \$200 and \$400.

If your parents need additional help, there are also a number of traveling companion services you can call, like Flying Companions and FirstLight Home Care. These services will help with making travel arrangements, accompanying your parents on the trip and facilitating their needs along the way. Fees for these services will vary depending on travel costs and what services are needed.

Security and boarding: To help your parents get through security screening a little easier, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) offers special expedited screening to passengers age 75 and older, as well as those with disabilities and medical conditions. This allows them to wait in a special line at some airports and move through security without removing their shoes or jackets. Call TSA Cares at 855-787-2227 or visit TSA.gov/travel/special-procedures to learn more.

When it is time to board, your parents can also take advantage of the airline's pre-boarding option for elderly passengers who need extra time to get on the plane and get settled. When the plane lands at its final destination, they can wait for the other passengers to disembark so attendants can assist them with their carry-on bags and escort them from the plane.