

Flying with a wheelchair

*Information for young people and families travelling with
mobility aids*

Purpose

*This guide provides information on how young
people and their families can prepare for a
flight with a mobility aid and minimize the risk of
damage to their equipment.*



In this document, the term “wheelchair” (WC) refers to the following technical mobility aids (TMAs): manual wheelchairs, power wheelchairs, tilt-in-space wheelchairs and adapted strollers.

1

Planning the trip

Things to consider:

- Determine how much assistance the young traveller will need for each step of the trip.
- The young traveller must be accompanied by someone aged 16 or over who can provide assistance in case of an emergency and if the young traveller is unable to:
 - Fasten or unfasten their seat belt.
 - Go to the emergency exit if there's an emergency.
 - Reach or adjust their life jacket or put on an oxygen mask.
 - Go to the bathroom on their own, feed themselves or take their medication.
 - Understand instructions given by in-flight staff.
- Flight time (can the young traveller sit for that long?)
- Check the WC's user guide to see if the WC should be stowed in the cabin or the hold.
 - See Appendix 1.
 - Have the WC's user guide on hand (may be requested by the airline).
- Determine if the WC has anchor points and tie-downs to secure it to the plane.
- Determine if the airline provides an onboard WC, and if so:
 - What type?
(its features may be important depending on the severity of the young traveller's condition)
 - How long will the young traveller have to sit in it?
 - How does it work?
(e.g., where do you get one?, when?)
 - Can the wheelchair be used to go to the toilet?

Essential carry-on items



- ☐ Photo ID, passport or visa (if applicable)
- ☐ Medicare card and private health insurance card
- ☐ Emergency contact
- ☐ Bag to store removable WC parts
- ☐ Repair kit
- ☐ Cushion to put on plane seat (check if possible with airlines)
- ☐ Duct tape
- ☐ Tie wraps
- ☐ Wheelchair tire tube
- ☐ Roll of bubble wrap (to protect the WC if it has to be stowed in the hold)
- ☐ Towels for positioning and to cover up during hygiene care
- ☐ Positioning accessories, if accepted by the airline (e.g., Bodypoint chest belt)
- ☐ Change of clothes
- ☐ Medication: Prescription medication must be in the original container or bear a pharmaceutical label with the name indicated on the ticket and boarding pass
- ☐ Medical care kit (e.g., catheters)
- ☐ Hygiene kit
- ☐ For tube feeding, bring the required amount and an emergency reserve within the permitted liquid limits
- ☐ Inhalers

Health certificate / medical equipment

- Have information on the young traveller's current state of health on hand if hospital treatment is required abroad.
- The airline may request proof that the young traveller has special needs related to a medical condition (e.g., oxygen tank, seat location, extra seat).
- If the young traveller is tube-fed, ask your doctor or nutritionist for a prescription.
- If the young traveller needs a suction device or positive-pressure respirator, ask your pulmonologist for a prescription. There are special requirements for boarding these devices.
- There may be restrictions on onboard oxygen (portable oxygen concentrator or oxygen cylinder):
 - Some airlines provide an oxygen supply for the duration of the flight.
 - Ask about the applicable fees and conditions.



2 Booking

- Book in advance.
- You can now book flights online with most airlines. They've added a category to indicate the type of assistance you need and the type of wheelchair.
- Specify that the young traveller uses a WC and has special needs.
- Check with the airline to see if there are any forms to fill out regarding the disability.
- Ask about safety constraints.
- Book the seat. Ask for help to find a suitable seat:
 - Confirm with the airline that the seat is adequate (e.g., fixed armrests can make transfers more difficult).

- Despite the regulations in place, ask the airline if you can get an aisle seat or a seat near the emergency exits:

- ➔ Sitting near the window makes transfers unsafe for both the young traveller and employees.
- ➔ If this situation arises during boarding, ask the in-charge flight attendant. If they refuse, speak directly to the pilot, who has the final say on what happens on their flight.

- Get information on all available types of assistance (services and equipment) and the associated fees:
 - Confirm when the young traveller will no longer be able to use their WC (boarding?).
 - Getting through the terminal.
 - Boarding.
 - Onboard services (meals, messages). For example: receive safety instructions personally, be notified about the weather, delays, baggage reclaim and flight connections.
- Ask for written confirmation of what has been agreed in terms of services/equipment to be provided.
- Call the airline 48 hours in advance to confirm the flight details and to ensure that the requested services/equipment are still available/allowed. Remind the airline of the need to have a WC on board.

3 Check-in

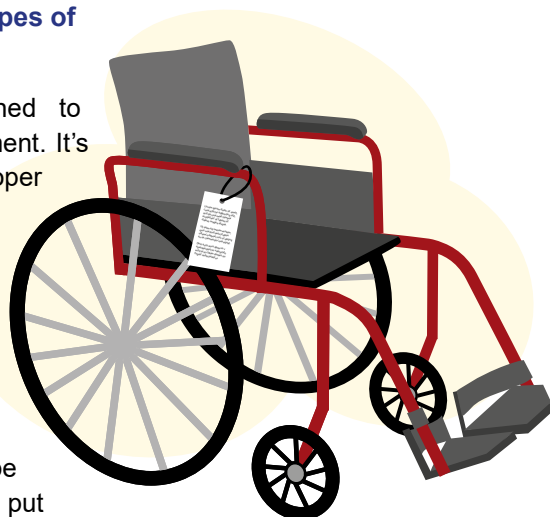
Check-in procedures

- Arrive at least two to three hours in advance.
- Go to the airline's check-in counter. There's usually a line for people who need assistance.
- Confirm with a staff member the services/equipment requested at the time of booking, and provide written confirmation (if applicable).

- The airline employee must fill out a transport form for the wheelchair with the following information:
 - The type of WC (manual or power).
 - The brand.
 - The type of battery and how to turn it off for the flight.
 - Provide the user guide (may be requested).
- The employee will notify the special assistance department of your arrival and ask you to wait in a designated area until they get there.
- The young traveller should be allowed to remain in their WC until boarding. You just have to ask.
 - The airline may refuse, depending on how the airport is set up.
 - If they refuse, the WC will be checked as hold baggage and the young traveller will be seated in an airport WC that may be uncomfortable.

Storage instructions for all types of WCs

- Staff members aren't trained to handle and stow WC equipment. It's up to you to give them the proper instructions.
- Inspect the WC before it's stowed in the hold (if applicable) and take photos of its condition **BEFORE** transport.
- Remove all parts that can be removed from the WC and put them in the carry-on baggage (protect control boxes, joysticks and fragile parts that can't be removed). If possible, fold the WC's parts to make it as compact as possible (see Appendix 2).
- If you have a power WC, set it to free-wheel mode so airline staff can push it.



- Provide photos or instructions to reduce the risk of damage to the WC, including:
 - A label indicating where to lift the WC.
 - A label indicating where to anchor the WC during transport.
 - A label indicating where the brake release lever is.
 - A travel tag: See Appendix 1.
- A tag will be attached to the wheelchair like any other piece of checked baggage.
- To use a posture device, you may need to provide written justification from a professional or doctor. Check if the airline accepts them on board first.

NOTE

Most planes have cabin stowage space that can accommodate a folding manual WC, i.e., where the pilot keeps their personal belongings.

There won't be enough space for all types of WCs. It's important to check the WC's dimensions and confirm that it will fit.

4

Safety (if applicable)

- Go to the toilet before going through security (empty incontinence bag).
- Keep your passport, boarding pass, prescriptions and medical documents detailing any special needs on hand as they may be requested.
- Power WCs are too wide to pass through metal detectors. If you have one, you'll have to go around. A pat-down may be required, but you can ask to have it done out of sight.
 - Tell the staff if the young traveller has a lap belt, an insulin pump or a pacemaker.
 - Tell the staff if the young traveller can't perform the requested movements (medical condition).

5 Moving through the terminal / Getting help in the terminal

- Use a map of the airport to determine where to go.
- If agreed upon with the airline, a temporary pass will be given to the young person's travel companion for use in the terminal and secure areas.

6 Boarding

- Please arrive at the boarding gate about an hour before departure.
- When you arrive, tell boarding gate staff about the services/needs specified at the time of booking.
- Passengers with disabilities are generally allowed to board before other passengers so they have time to settle in. A preboarding announcement is usually made at the start of the boarding process.
- In some airports, airstairs are used to board the plane, so the airline must be informed that the young traveller can't climb stairs. The airline typically offers two solutions:
 - A small vehicle with a lifting platform.
 - A special seat manually carried to the top by staff.
- Transfer to the aisle chair to be wheeled to your seat. Request the assistance of two flight attendants to transfer to your seat. There are many different models, and they vary from one airline to another.
- If necessary, ask the flight attendants to help you stow your carry-on baggage in the overhead compartments.



7 On the plane

Messages and announcements

- Once you're seated on the plane, take the time to read the safety instructions.
- You can ask for explanations to be provided in person.
- If requested at the time of booking, you'll be notified about the weather, delays, baggage reclaim and flight connections.

Meals and snacks

- The crew can assist with the following:
 - Describe menu options and explain how the food is placed on the tray.
 - Pour dressing and other liquids.
 - Open packages, bags and pouches.
 - Cut food.

Toilets

- Ask about the size and type of toilets on the plane when booking.
- Toilets should be accessible, with grab bars, emergency call buttons and other special features. However, they're usually **not WC-accessible**. Small steps may be necessary due to limited space.

Urine/incontinence

- Use a green soft drink bottle so people can't tell if there's urine in it (e.g., Mountain Dew, Sprite, 7 Up).
- Use a blanket to cover up.
- Have an extra incontinence bag.

Positioning on the plane

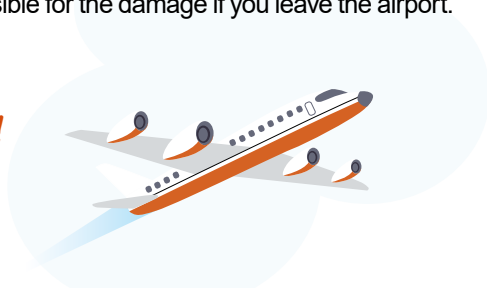
- A ROHO air cushion isn't recommended for air travel due to pressurization, which makes this type of cushion much less comfortable. A gel or foam cushion would be a better option.
- Recline the seat if possible.
- Use straps for trunk support (ask your positioning program occupational therapist for advice on this equipment).
- Use a footrest during the flight (slip it under the seat when taking off/landing).

8

Getting off the plane

- Wait for the WC in the airline seat.
- Ask the staff for assistance in getting to the exit.
- Before leaving the terminal, thoroughly check your wheelchair for any damage. If damaged:
 - Fill in a damage claim form with the carrier (before you leave if possible).
 - Contact the airline right away and take photos, as it may be difficult to prove that the airline is responsible for the damage if you leave the airport.

HAVE A GOOD TRIP!



Information from:

Presperin Pedersen, Jessica (2019). *Leaving on a jet plane*. Canadian Seating and Mobility Conference 2019, Toronto.

Presperin Pedersen, Jessica (2019). *Protecting the wheelchair on a commercial flight: How people from the wheelchair industry can help*. Canadian Seating and Mobility Conference 2019, Toronto, pages 27-34, https://issuu.com/bhta/docs/directions_2019.2_-_protecting_the_wheelchair_on_a

Caron, Lucie et D'Arcy, Sylvie (07-2012). *Prendre l'avion avec un jeune présentant une déficience motrice*, Centre de réadaptation Marie Enfant.

Public Works and Government Services Canada (March 2009, last modified: 2015-07-10). *Take Charge of Your Travel: A Guide for Travellers with Disabilities* (Catalogue No. TT4-14/2009E), <https://otc-cta.gc.ca/eng/take-charge-your-travel>

Julien et Rudy (16-09-2019). *Comment prendre l'avion en fauteuil roulant: notre guide complet!*, Handilol 2012-2019, <https://handilol.com/comment-prendre-l'avion-en-fauteuil-roulant-conseils-voyage-handicap/>

Travel Tag for Wheelchair on Airline

Manufacturer:

Model:

Serial No.:

Type of Wheelchair

☐ Manual wheelchair: ☐ Foldable ☐ Rigid

☐ Scooter: ☐ Key operated

☐ Power wheelchair:

☐ Acid (must be removed)
☐ Gel
☐ Lithium (must be removed and in container)

Type of battery:

☐ Power Assist on Manual Wheelchair (report lithium battery)

Removable Parts	Stays on WC	Stowed in Cabin
Seat cushion		
Headrest		
Armrests		
Footrests		
Control device (joystick, special controls, switches, etc.)		
Backrest		
Tray		
Belt/straps		
Wheels		
Spoke guards		
Clothes guards		
Other:		

Additional information on the wheelchair

Weight:

Length w/o footrest:

Width:

Removable control devices (joystick, special controls, switches, etc.): ☐ Yes ☐ No

Can be reclined/folded/tilted to decrease height:

Release lever to free wheel:

Personal Information

Name:

Telephone number:

Alternative contact:

Based on travel tag created by Jessica Presperin Pedersen. (2019). *Protecting the wheelchair on a commercial flight: How people from the wheelchair industry can help*. Canadian Seating and Mobility Conference 2019, Toronto, pages 27-34, https://issuu.com/bhta/docs/directions_2019.2_-_protecting_the_wheelchair_on_a

Removable parts and folding components

Power wheelchair



Here's what a power wheelchair looks like with all components removed and the wheelchair folded back:

Note: The wheelchair's height is lower when tilted.



Removable parts and folding components

Manual wheelchair (folding frame)



Here's what a manual wheelchair (folding frame) looks like with all components removed and folded as much as possible:



Removable parts and folding components

Manual wheelchair (rigid frame)

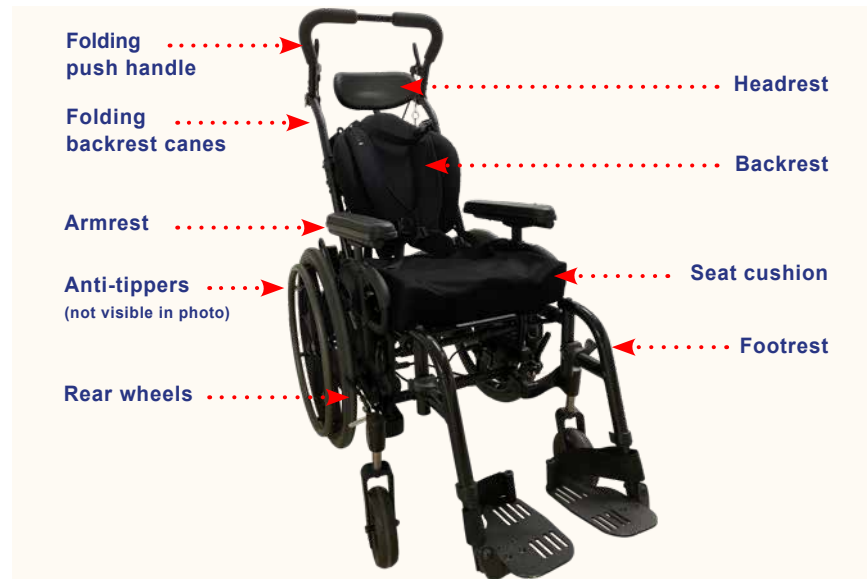


Here's what a manual wheelchair (rigid frame) looks like with all components removed and folded as much as possible:



Removable parts and folding components

Tilt-in-space wheelchair

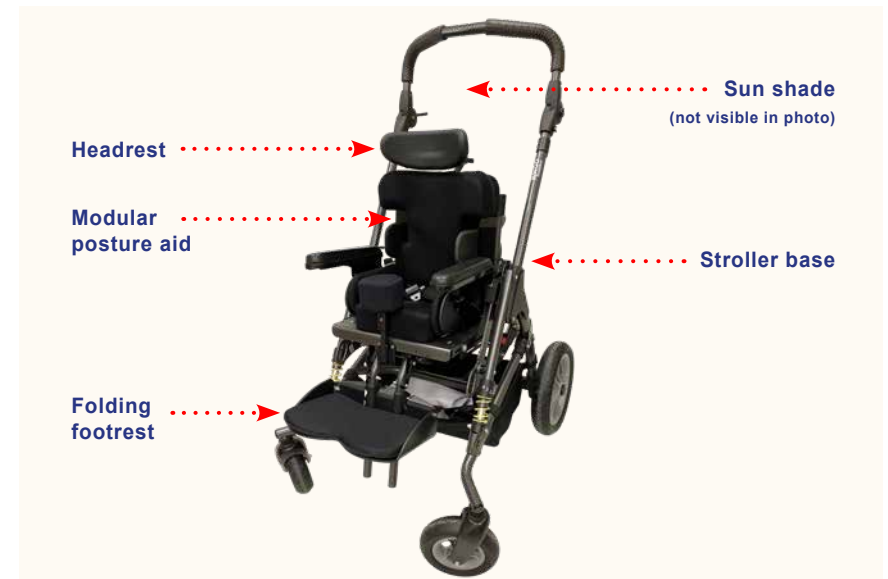


Here's what a tilt-in-space wheelchair looks like with all components removed and folded as much as possible:



Removable parts and folding components

Adapted stroller



Here's what an adapted stroller with a posture aid looks like with all components removed and folded as much as possible:



Positioning on the plane

Pillow/cushion to support pelvis and trunk

Universal strap to support trunk fastened behind the seat

Airplane seat belt to support pelvis

Towel roll under knees to reduce sliding on seat

Footrest



NOTE



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Impression

Imprimerie du CHU Sainte-Justine

Juin 2022

F-7027-A GRM: 30013065