

## Acknowledgement

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## Air Travel With A Heart Condition

An air traveller with a heart condition is more at risk of developing problems during a flight because oxygen needs may not be met by the decreased supply of oxygen in the plane.

While commercial aircrafts are pressurized, they are not pressurized to a sea level equivalent. If the flight is longer than one hour, the cabin will be pressurized to about 8,000 feet above sea level. The supply of oxygen is very decreased at that altitude. People in good health are not affected. However, travellers with heart and blood vessel problems may have some trouble, as the heart may be unable to maintain adequate circulation.

### What conditions should I be worried about?

If you have any of the following conditions, you should see your doctor before travelling by air:

- Recurrent chest pain or angina
- A heart attack
- Heart failure
- Heart surgery

### My angina has been treated for a year. Will I have trouble travelling?

If your symptoms are well controlled by medication—which normally means that you can walk a block or climb one flight of stairs at a regular pace without pain—you should be able to tolerate air travel well.

Those people who develop new chest pain before travelling (at home or away) should consult a doctor before leaving or returning home by air.

## What if I HAVE had a heart attack?

If travelling is unnecessary, you should wait at least four to six weeks before travelling. You should not travel before all the complications of your heart attack have been controlled. If you had a heart attack while away from home, the doctor who is treating you should consult the airline physician. They will make the best decision on your behalf.

Most likely you will need to have some tests (i.e., stress test) and you may need to have supplemental oxygen on the flight. You may even need a medical escort (e.g., a doctor and/or a nurse) depending on your condition. This may be expensive, which makes it important to have good health insurance when you travel.

## I'm being treated for heart failure. Can I travel by air?

If you are healthy otherwise, and you don't become short of breath with ordinary everyday activities, you should be able to fly without a problem. Supplemental oxygen might be needed. If your heart failure is not yet controlled, it is best to delay travel until your physician can gain better control of your heart failure.

## How long should I wait to travel after open-heart surgery?

This depends on the exact type of surgery you had and your present condition. Again, if you don't absolutely have to travel, give yourself at least three to four weeks to recover before travelling by air. Surgery to bypass a blocked artery or to replace a valve are major operations and need to be followed by an appropriate recovery time.

If you want to return home, airlines normally will consider allowing air travel after one week on a case-by-case basis. If your arteries were reopened by a balloon procedure (angioplasty) without open chest surgery, you can return home as quickly as the next day, as long as you had no complications and you have no symptoms.

## What else should I look out for before travelling?

Many other conditions can be affected by air travel—for example, stroke, unexplained temporary paralysis, anemia, lung problems and others. But the general principle is always the same: **If travelling is not absolutely necessary, wait until the condition is under control and you have had a good recovery period.**

If you can't wait to travel, talk to your doctor about your plans. Your doctor can make appropriate recommendations.

The following general recommendations also apply:

- Arrive early at the airport to minimize stress.
- If you are an inexperienced traveller, ask an experienced traveller to go with you to the airport.
- Make sure you carry enough medication in your hand luggage.
- Keep a list of medications and their dosages in case you lose your medication.
- Adjust the times when you take your medication based on time zones crossed.
- Keep a copy of your most recent electrocardiogram.
- Contact the airlines early about your special needs such as oxygen, wheelchair or special diet.

Cardiac or heart problems should not prevent you from travelling if you respect these guidelines. In fact, a well-prepared and timely trip can be very beneficial. Enjoy your next flight!