

NAVIGATING THE SKIES

An Accessible Air Travel Guide



There are many things to keep in mind when traveling by plane with a physical disability. In this guide, we will provide you with tips and tricks to help you to be as prepared as possible for a safe and comfortable flight.

OUR TRAVEL GUIDE IS A TOOL FOR ANYONE WITH A SPINAL CORD INJURY, PHYSICAL DISABILITY, OR HAS DIFFICULTIES WITH OVERALL MOBILITY WHO WISHES TO TRAVEL BY AIR.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The information in this travel guide was collected from a panel of experienced travelers, advocacy groups, healthcare providers and government agencies. Acknowledgements to:

- Members of United Spinal Association with special recognition to Daniela Izzie, Jennifer Kumiyama, [Kenny Salvini](#), and many more!
- [Paralyzed Veterans of America](#)
- [Open Doors Organization](#)
- [Spinal Cord Injury BC](#)
- [The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center Assistive Technology Clinic](#)
- [The Medical University of South Carolina Occupational Therapy Program](#)

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YOUR RIGHTS AS A TRAVELER WITH DISABILITY

AIR CARRIER ACCESS ACT OF 1986

The Air Carrier Access Act of 1986, also known as the ACAA, was enacted to prohibit commercial airlines from discriminating against travelers with disabilities. Governed by the US Department of Transportation (USDOT), the ACAA mandates rules and regulations for airlines operating in the United States to follow. A few rules under the ACAA specify airlines:

- Cannot require travelers with disabilities to accept special services that the travelers do not request unless there are concerns for safety.
- Cannot take adverse action against someone asserting the rights on their own or on behalf of a traveler with a disability.
- Cannot limit number of passengers with disabilities on a flight.
- Cannot charge for accommodations.

AIRLINE PASSENGERS WITH DISABILITIES BILL OF RIGHTS

<https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/disabilitybillofrights>

The Right to Be Treated with Dignity and Respect.

The Right to Receive Information About Services and Aircraft Capabilities and Limitations.

The Right to Receive Information in an Accessible Format.

The Right to Accessible Airport Facilities.

The Right to Assistance at Airports.

The Right to Assistance on the Aircraft.

The Right to Travel with an Assistive Device or Service Animal.

The Right to Receive Seating Accommodations.

The Right to Accessible Aircraft Features.

The Right to Resolution of a Disability-Related Issue.

CONTINUED ADVOCACY...

There is still a long way to go ensure that air travel is equitable and fair to all. There are many working groups, along with United Spinal Association's Government Relations and Advocacy and Policy teams, that serve to advocate for actions to enhance accessibility in air travel. Some of these continuing efforts have led to the passing of the Air Carrier Access Amendments Act of 2017, included in the Federal Aviation Administration Act of 2018, which resulted in incorporating accountability measures regarding accessible air travel such as the formation of the [Air Carrier Access Act Advisory Committee](#) and ensuring damaged, destroyed or lost wheelchairs, scooters and mobility devices are counted and listed separately from damaged baggage.



For more information about all our policy priorities and action alerts on air travel and beyond, visit our webpage: <https://unitedspinal.org/accessible-air-travel/>

BOOKING YOUR FLIGHT

STEP 1

RESEARCH THE AIRLINES

Review the policies of various airlines regarding travelers with disabilities and choose the airline that best meets your needs. See page 27 for a list of contacts for major US airlines.

STEP 2

FIND A FLIGHT

- If able, try to find nonstop or direct flights to your destination. If no direct flights are available, consider the time required for things like deplaning and traveling to a new gate at your layover airport. Once you've factored in all the time needed to meet your needs between flights, find the flight route that works best for you.
- If you're traveling to a far destination, consider breaking up the travel into more than one day to allow your body to rest.
- When selecting a flight, research your airline's accessibility page and information about what wheelchair dimensions can fit in their cargo or in their onboard closet/s.

Connecting, Direct, Nonstop Flights?

- **CONNECTING FLIGHTS** Flights with scheduled stops that require you to change planes at connecting airports. If you choose this type of flight, make sure there is enough time between connections for things like deplaning and wheelchair assistance.
- **DIRECT FLIGHTS** Flights with a scheduled stop, typically for refueling or dropping-off/picking-up travelers, before reaching your destination. Direct flights do not require a plane change, but you may need to deplane with your belongings during the break.
- **NONSTOP FLIGHTS** Flights that take you directly to your destination without any stops. If able, choose nonstop flights when booking your trip.

DIRECT OR NONSTOP FLIGHTS ARE RECOMMENDED DUE TO LESS RISK FOR PERSONAL INJURY OR DAMAGE TO YOUR MOBILITY/ASSISTIVE DEVICES



TRAVELING WITH A COMPANION

Travelers with disabilities can choose to travel independently or with a companion. However, a [safety assistant](#) may be required if airline personnel determine that an assistant is necessary for safety to:

- Provide assistance to a traveler with severe mobility impairments in exiting the aircraft in case of an emergency.
- Provide assistance in establishing communication means necessary for required safety briefings.
- Provide assistance for individuals traveling in a stretcher or incubator.

REQUEST ACCOMMODATIONS

STEP 3

- Most airlines will prompt you to self-identify any accommodations you need when booking online. If, for any reason, a prompt does not appear, contact the airline directly to provide advance notice of any accommodations you need.
- Call your airline about your accommodation needs and request they add them to the flight notes - see page 9. At this time, you can also request that you and your companions/family member(s) are seated together at no extra charge and that you are in a seat that best works for you, also at no extra charge. NOTE: a high-level quad may want a companion or family member seated behind them to allow for upper body straps to go around the seat for greater securement. See page 21 and following for additional resources.



PRO-TIP!

**IT IS ALWAYS BEST
PRACTICE TO REQUEST
PRE-BOARDING
ACCOMMODATIONS**

See page 23 for a list of accommodations and services accessible to travelers with disabilities.

CHOOSE YOUR SEAT (IF ABLE)

STEP 4

- If you can, choose your aisle, middle or window seat while booking, consider your in-flight needs and select accordingly. If pre-selecting your seat is not an option, contact the airline in advance to notify them of any seating accommodations you'll need.

- Types of [seating accommodations](#)
 - **Seats with Moveable Aisle Armrests** There are designated aisle seats on an aircraft with removeable armrests. These types of seats provide ease in the transfer process to and from an aisle chair.

 - **Bulkhead Seats** Bulkhead seats are usually the first row of seats in each class cabin. They offer more legroom, but they do not have moveable armrests. These types of seats are favorable for those traveling with a service animal.

 - **Adjoined Seats** An adjoining seat must be provided for personal care attendants traveling with an individual with a disability.

 - **Extra leg room** This may be medically necessary for you to assist with transfers and to avoid possible pressure points on your knees.

PREPARING FOR YOUR FLIGHT

- Familiarize yourself with your rights as a traveler with a disability under the [ACAA](#).
- Do your research! Ask someone who has traveled before.
- Learn how to protect your assistive device while traveling.

See page 13 for tips on how to protect your equipment while traveling.

United Spinal Association offers many ways to connect with others who may be able to provide advice on air travel.

- > [United Spinal Resource Center Help Desk](#)
- > [United Spinal Social Hour Groups](#)
(Twice every Thursday at 1pm and 8pm EST)

In preparation for your upcoming flight, plan to do the following steps at least one week before traveling:

- Provide [advance notice](#) or confirm your requested accommodations with your airline. Call your airline's accessibility services line. See page 12 for more information.**
- Familiarize yourself with the security screening process. See page 18 for more information.**
- If traveling with a service animal, complete the [USDOT Service Animal Air Transportation Form](#) to present to the airline on travel day(s).**
- Plan out your bowel and bladder management routine around your travel day(s).**
- Bathrooms on single-aisle aircraft are not accessible to wheelchair users. Aircraft with double aisles vary in types of accessible bathrooms available.**
- Pack all medications, essential medical supplies, removable seat cushion, and equipment in your carry-on bag in case your checked bags get lost or delayed.**

ADVANCE NOTICE & MEDICAL CERTIFICATES

The ACAA does not require travelers with disabilities to provide [advance notice](#) or [medical certificates](#) regarding their disability to obtain services or accommodations. However, airlines can request travelers with disabilities to provide a 48-hour advance notice (72 hours for international flights) and to check-in one hour before the departure time for specific accommodations such as:

- Accommodations to transport a service animal.
- Accommodations to use an onboard chair on the aircraft.
- Accommodations to transport a power wheelchair on an aircraft with fewer than 60 seats.
- Accommodations to package batteries for assistive devices for stowage.
- Accommodations to transport 10 or more travelers with disabilities who make reservations as a group

If a traveler forgets to provide the requested advance notice or early check-in, airlines are still obligated to provide accommodations requiring reasonable efforts, without delaying the flight.

TIPS FOR PROTECTING YOUR ASSISTIVE DEVICE

ASSISTIVE DEVICE According to the USDOT, an [assistive device](#) is any durable medical equipment (DME) that enables users to perform activities of daily living with greater independence. Assistive devices include but are not limited to wheelchairs, crutches, canes, walkers or braces/prosthetics. Listed below are some tips to help you protect your equipment while traveling.



PRIOR TO YOUR TRAVEL DAY, MAKE SURE YOU...

- Familiarize yourself with the specifics of your assistive device, including weight, dimensions, battery type, etc.
 - Use your device's manual for reference.
- Notify your DME supplier that you will be traveling by plane. This is important to do in case something happens to your mobility/assistive device while traveling. Before your trip, ask your DME supplier for a representative and contact number close to your travel destination for any potential repair and service needs.

- Ask DME suppliers in the area that you are traveling to if you can rent the same or a similar device as yours in case something happens to your personal mobility/assistive device while traveling.
- Learn the proper care instructions for your mobility/assistive device.
 - Know how to disassemble and reassemble any removable or fragile parts for stowage, including locking and unlocking it. If you are traveling with a companion or aide, make sure they know how to do this as well.
 - Consult with a specialized seating and mobility therapist for expert assistance.
 - Stick warning labels on areas sensitive to breaking and on moving parts such as armrests and joysticks.
- Prepare an information sheet for airline personnel with clear instructions on how to care for and store your assistive device. If possible, laminate the sheet or place it in a protective cover as you will place this directly on your assistive device when traveling.
 - Many airlines provide their own forms for this. See page 27 for more information.

ON YOUR TRAVEL DAY, MAKE SURE YOU...

- Obtain a gate check tag to attach to your mobility/assistive device if stowing it in the cargo compartment.
- Visibly attach your mobility/assistive device information sheet directly on your device.

- Disassemble any removeable or fragile parts for stowage. Store parts in a protective case and carry them on to the cabin with you.
- If able, personally speak to the airline personnel handling your assistive device, at the gate, to instruct them on how to properly care for and store your equipment. (This creates a record of communication regarding your accommodation requests).
- Take a photo or record a video of the condition of your assistive device before turning it over to airline personnel.
- Upon arrival to your destination, inspect your mobility/assistive device when returned to you either at the gate or baggage claim.
- If your mobility/assistive device was return to you damaged:
 - Take a photo or record a video of your assistive device.
 - File a complaint with the airline. See page 21 for more information.



PRO-TIP!

**ANY MOBILITY/
ASSISTIVE DEVICE OR
PIECES OF A MOBILITY/
ASSISTIVE DEVICE
STOWED IN THE CABIN
DO NOT COUNT
TOWARDS THE
CARRY-ON BAGGAGE
LIMIT.**

AT THE AIRPORT

CHECKING-IN



Arrive to the airport 2-3 hours prior to boarding.



Check-in at the airline's ticket counter, kiosk, or mobile app.



Obtain a gate check tag for any assistive device to be stowed in the cargo compartment.



If you requested a [guide](#) to assist you through the airport, go to the designated area that the airline indicated.



Go through security. See page 18 for information on the security screening process for travelers with disabilities.



PRO-TIP!

CONFIRM YOUR ACCOMMODATIONS WITH AIRLINE PERSONNEL UPON ARRIVAL AT THE AIRPORT AND AT YOUR DEPARTURE GATE.

BEFORE YOU BOARD



Confirm your accommodations with the agents at your departure gate.

- If you are traveling with an airline that does not pre-assign seats, this is the time to let them know of the seating accommodations you'll need.
- If you requested aisle chair assistance to board, confirm with the gate agents that the aircraft also has an onboard chair in case you need to use the lavatory during the flight.



Use the restroom before boarding if time permits.



Prepare your assistive device for stowage. Review page 13.



Priority pre-boarding.

- If you require an aisle chair to board or deplane. See page 19 for tips on using an aisle chair.

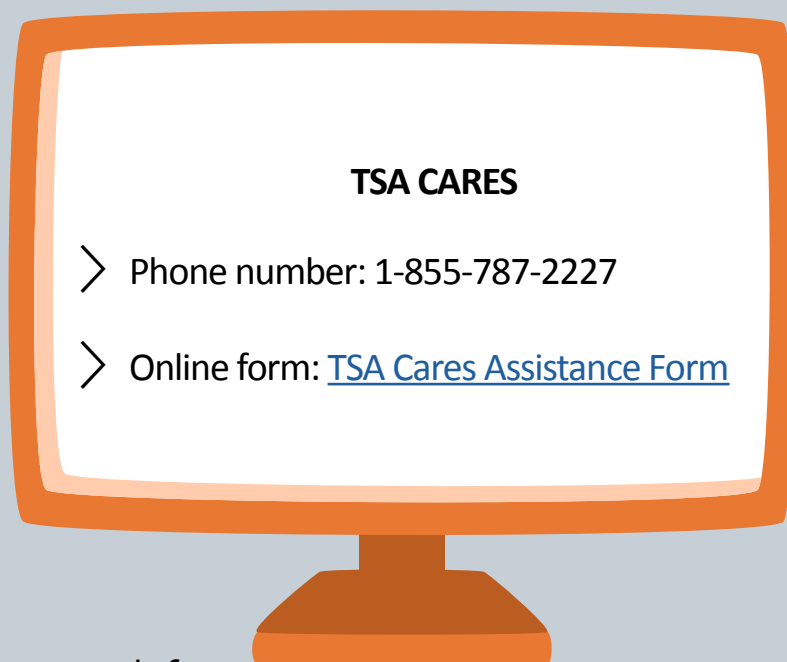
SECURITY SCREENING

TSA SECURITY SCREENING

Every traveler is required to go through the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) checkpoint for screening. Fortunately, TSA has a helpline, TSA Cares, available to provide travelers with disabilities with assistance regarding the screening process. It is best to contact TSA 72 hours before traveling for any specific questions you may have. You may also fill out their online form to request assistance at the security checkpoint.

- TSA also advises travelers with disabilities to fill out a [Disability Notification Card](#) in advance to present to the TSA officers at the security checkpoint. The card notifies the officers that you may need alternative screening procedures.

- During the screening process, you can ask for:
 - A private screening with or without a companion.
 - The screening to be completed in your wheelchair or scooter.



AIRLINE SECURITY SCREENING

Airlines may require additional screening beyond TSA measures, especially if there's a concern of possible hazardous items concealed on your person or within your assistive device. This occurrence is uncommon, but if it happens, know that you can ask for a private screening.

TIPS FOR USING AN AISLE CHAIR

BOARDING



Proceed down the jet bridge on your own mobility/assistive device before transferring onto an aisle chair.



If able, transfer into the aisle chair on your own. If unable to transfer without assistance, make sure you clearly communicate to the team assisting you with specific details on how to best transfer you to your assigned seat.

DEPLANING



When deplaning, make sure your wheelchair or other mobility/assistive device is waiting for you on the jet bridge before you transfer into an aisle chair.



As with the boarding process, it is important for you to communicate clearly with the team assisting you if you require transfer assistance.

**Visit here for more
key information,
action alerts, best
practices and videos
on air travel:**

**[https://
unitedspinal.org/
advocacy-program/](https://unitedspinal.org/advocacy-program/)**

WHAT TO DO IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

If you experience any issues or feel that your rights as a traveler with disability were violated while traveling, follow the steps below:

1. Document any damages, injuries, or other issues caused by the airline.

- Obtain photo and video evidence.
- Obtain the names of all airline personnel involved in the incident.
- Obtain contact information of any witnesses, if able.

2. File a complaint with the airline's Complaint Resolution Officer (CRO) immediately.

- The CRO will provide you with a written statement on whether they agree or disagree if an ACAA violation occurred. All written statements should include a summary of the incident and planned action steps, if any.

COMPLAINT RESOLUTION OFFICER (CRO)

CROs serve as the airline's specialist on disability related issues and have authority to resolve complaints on behalf of the airline. Each airline is required to have a CRO available during operating hours either by telephone or present at the airport.

3. VERY IMPORTANT! File a complaint with the USDOT within 6 months of the day of the incident.

- **OPTION #1:** Submit a complaint through the USDOT's Air Travel Service Complaint of Comment Form.
- **OPTION #2:** Submit a complaint by sending a letter by mail to the USDOT.



4. Follow-up with both the airline and the USDOT.

- Continue to follow-up with both the airline and the USDOT as needed.

LIST OF AVAILABLE ACCOMMODATIONS + SERVICES

The table below summarizes available accommodations for travelers with disabilities, particularly for those with mobility impairments. To review all accommodations and services available to all travelers with disabilities, please refer to the [ACAA](#) or contact the USDOT's hotline for travelers with disabilities at 1-800-778-4838.

Airport Accessibility Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Designated animal relief areas.▪ Accessible facilities in airline terminals that comply with Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, including accessible kiosks.▪ Closed captioning with high contrast displays on all televisions and other audio-visual displays.
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Aircraft Accessibility Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Designated seats with moveable aisle armrests.▪ Adjoined seats for personal care attendants accompanying travelers with disabilities.▪ Accessible lavatories for aircrafts with more than one aisle.▪ Onboard chairs equipped for aircrafts with more than 60 seats.▪ Designated priority spaces for assistive and medical device stowage onboard.▪ Closed captioning with high contrast displays on all televisions and other audio-visual displays.
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Service Animals

The ACAA defines service animals as dogs (of any breed and size) trained to perform tasks for the benefit of disabled travelers.

- Airlines cannot charge travelers with disabilities for providing transportation for a service animal.
- Airlines must allow service animals to accompany their handler on the traveler's lap or foot space, as long the service animal does not encroach on another traveler's space and the service animal complies with safety regulations set by the Federal Aviation Administration.



<p>Airport Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wheelchair guide/assistance - a service provided by airlines to assist travelers with disabilities within the airport. This service includes assistance to and from varying locations in the airport such as the airport drop-off point, security, gates, baggage claim, restrooms, service animal relief areas, ground transportations, etc. ▪ Assistance to package batteries of assistive devices in preparation for stowage. ▪ Pre-boarding. ▪ Boarding and deplaning assistance, including use of personnel assistance, ground wheelchairs, accessible motorized carts, aisle chairs, lifts, ramps, etc.
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<p>Onboard Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assistance with using an onboard chair. ▪ Assistance with moving to and from seats (e.g: seat strapping: https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/seat-strapping-wheelchairs-2013-word) ▪ Assistance with preparations for eating, such as opening packages and identifying food. ▪ Assistance with moving to and from the lavatory. ▪ Assistance with storing and retrieving carry-on items and mobility aids stowed in the cabin. <p><u>Onboard services NOT included:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assistance with eating. ▪ Assistance within the lavatory. ▪ Assistance with medical services (i.e., medication management).
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Stowage of Assistive Devices: Aircraft Cabin	<p>Assistive devices such as manual wheelchairs, canes, crutches, walkers can be stowed in the aircraft cabin in designated priority spaces, overhead compartments, and under seats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Assistive devices stowed in the aircraft cabin do not count towards carry-on baggage policies.
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Stowage of Assistive Devices: Cargo	<p>Assistive devices that cannot be stowed in the aircraft cabin have priority in the cargo compartment over other cargo and baggage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Assistive devices stowed in the cargo compartment should be among the first items to be retrieved for a timely return to owners.▪ Assistive devices stowed in the cargo compartment are to be returned to owners at their request either at baggage claim or at the door of the aircraft.
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LIST OF CONTACT INFORMATION FOR MAJOR US AIRLINES

Page 28 contains a list of contact information for major US passenger airlines certificated by the Federal Aviation Administration. Within the table also includes links to airline specific accommodation request forms and airline specific assistive device information forms, if applicable.

Note: Click on the green checkmarks to access airline specific accommodation request forms and airline specific assistive device information forms.

UNITED SPINAL ASSOCIATION CONTACTS/RESOURCES

For any policy questions, please contact the Government Relations team at policy@unitedspinal.org. For any advocacy questions, please contact the Advocacy team at advocacy@unitedspinal.org.

Visit www.unitedspinal.org or call (800) 404-2898.

AIRLINE	PHONE NUMBER	ACCOMMODATION FORM	ASSISTIVE DEVICE INFO FORM
aha!	1-775-439-0888	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alaska Airlines	1-800-503-0101	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Allegiant	1-702-505-8888	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
American Airlines	1-800-237-7976	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Avelo	1-346-616-9500	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Breeze Airways	N/A	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cape Air	1-800-227-3247	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Countour Airlines	1-888-33-6686	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Delta	1-404-209-3434	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Eastern Airlines, LLC	1-855-216-7601	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Elite Airways	1-877-393-2510	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Frontier	1-801-401-9004	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hawaiian Airlines	1-800-367-5320	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
JetBlue	1-800-538-2583	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Silver Airways	1-800-401-9100	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Southwest	1-800-435-9792	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Spirit	1-855-728-3555	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sun County Airlines	1-651-905-2737	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
United	1-800-228-2744	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>



As an Air Travel Initiative program supporter, Numotion is part of and makes possible United Spinal's inaugural campaign to ensure safer air travel for wheelchair users and to improve current injustices and harm to both wheelchairs and wheelchair users. The initiative includes activations focused on key air travel stakeholders guided by the voices and authentic experiences of United Spinal's large grassroots advocacy network. United Spinal represents over 5.5 million wheelchair users nationwide.