

Air Travel After Stroke

By Julia Schwarz

Can I Fly After Stroke?

The short answer is yes, but not right away. There are also certain elements of flying you need to think through before planning a trip. Below are some common questions about flying after stroke:

When Will I Be Ready to Fly Again?

It is recommended that you wait at least two weeks after a stroke to fly. Symptoms are generally the most intense during the first two weeks following a stroke, and new symptoms may arise, so it is best to avoid flying during this time period (1).

If you have had any brain surgery around the time of your stroke, wait at least one week from the surgery to fly. Air can get trapped in one's head during surgery, and this air can expand in a low pressure airplane cabin, leading to serious health issues (2).

After the two week time frame, consider how the effects of your stroke will impact your flying. Will you be able to board the airplane, move around on board, and sit comfortably for an extended flight? Is there a family member or friend who can accompany you on the trip? Thinking through these questions is essential before flying after a stroke (3).

As with many decisions after stroke, it is best to talk through them with your doctor, as they know you and your individual healthcare needs.

What are the Risks of Flying After Stroke?

Airplane cabins have less oxygen than the normal environment. If a stroke has left you with heart or breathing problems, it is important to consider this in your decision to fly. If you need supplemental oxygen during a flight, then you will need a Department of Transportation Approved battery-powered portable oxygen concentrator on board.

When you are sitting on a long flight, it is possible to develop a clot in your legs, also known as deep vein thrombosis (DVT). A piece can break off of the clot and get lodged in your lungs, or if you have a small hole in your heart, known as a patent foramen ovale, travel to your brain and cause a stroke. DVTs can develop in anyone on a long flight, but they are more common if you have had a stroke. Therefore, it is essential that you get up and move when the captain says you are free to move about the cabin! If you are not able to walk, you should flex your ankles frequently or move your arms and legs manually throughout the flight. Drink lots of water when flying and avoid alcohol, which can dehydrate you. Wearing elastic compression stockings can also decrease your risk of DVT.

How Should I Plan Ahead?

Call the airline at least two days ahead of time to let them know if you have mobility issues or if you will need assistance getting on and off the flight. The Transportation Security Administration has put together a list of information that can be helpful when flying with medical conditions available here: <https://www.tsa.gov/travel/special-procedures>.

Flights can run late and luggage can get lost, so pack extra medication in your carry-on items to avoid that annoying delay or lost luggage becoming a health issue.

A major concern with traveling after stroke is that you will likely be leaving your support network of family, doctors, and caregivers at home. Look into the medical facilities where you are going before you leave, so you are prepared should you need them. Call your health insurance to make sure you will be covered at the medical facilities where you are traveling. If you are not, consider getting travel insurance.

Sources

1. S. Association, Holidays after stroke. (2012).
2. A. Amato-Watkins, V. M. Rao, P. Leach, Air travel after intracranial surgery: a survey of advice given to patients by consultant neurosurgeons in the UK. *Br J Neurosurg* **27**, 9-11 (2013).

3. A. Barros *et al.*, Nonurgent commercial air travel after nonhemorrhagic cerebrovascular accident. *Air Med J* **33**, 106-108 (2014).