

Smart travel preparations can help patients stay healthy during holidays

CTCA

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Thanksgiving week marks the busiest travel time of the year. For cancer patients, that means not just visiting with friends and loved ones. It also means taking extra steps to avoid additional illnesses. Cancer and its treatment can weaken the immune system, leaving patients vulnerable to a number of infections, including pneumonia or bronchitis. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [10 percent of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy seek hospital care for an infection.](#)

To stay healthy this holiday season, patients and their travel companions can take a number of precautions [before ever boarding that flight](#). First, start by consulting your oncology team to confirm you are healthy enough to fly. Cancer patients with severe anemia, brain tumors or low oxygen levels [may not be able to fly](#), according to the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO). Ask your care team for written documentation of your condition and any necessary medical instructions, and carry with you a list of emergency contact numbers, just in case. Make sure to note, too, whether you are carrying any medical devices or need any special accommodations. You may also want to have an extra prescription filled on all medications, in case your trip is unexpectedly extended, and ask your oncologist to recommend cancer care providers and hospitals in the area you are visiting. This is a good time to get firmly acquainted with your insurance policy, so you know your coverage and any necessary out-of-pocket costs that may come with emergency care. Before purchasing your ticket, you may also consider buying travel insurance, just in case you are unable to take the trip when the departure date arrives.

Once you are onboard, additional challenges may arise. For those with [lymphedema](#), a common side effect for patients with breast or certain other cancers, for example, the swelling in the limbs may worsen with changes in air pressure mid-flight. To help alleviate the swelling, wear compression sleeves and loose clothing, and move around as much as is comfortably possible during the flight. Try [getting up once an hour](#) to improve circulation, drinking lots of bottled water, and skipping alcoholic or caffeinated beverages, which may make you feel bloated. Staying modestly mobile may also help prevent thrombosis, or blood clots, which can develop in even healthy passengers during long flights but are especially considered a risk for patients undergoing chemotherapy, as well as those with lung or digestive system cancers and those who recently had surgery.

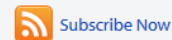
Depending on your condition, your doctor may discourage you from attempting lengthy flights. If you are cleared to travel, consider traveling with a buddy who can help carry the luggage, navigate the airport and run interference on any other issues that may arise. Many airlines and airports now offer a simplified airport screening process through the [TSA Pre[®]](#) program, which can ease some of the stress that often comes with traveling.

Other precautions are not exclusive to travelers, but they are still important to remember. Because patients undergoing chemotherapy are more vulnerable to infection, the CDC recommends [consistent hand washing with soap and water](#). Alcohol-based hand sanitizer is another good alternative, especially when soap and water are unavailable. So think about packing a small bottle in your carry-on bag, along with medication, sunscreen and your medical documents and contact numbers. Packing the carry-on with healthy snacks, travel-size liquid meal replacements, hard candies or lozenges may also help relieve common treatment-related side effects like nausea, mouth sores and dry mouth. And if you have any concerns about getting ill during the flight, request an aisle seat or one near the restroom for easy access and peace of mind.

The holidays are meant to be shared and remembered with the loved ones in your life. Building new memories are all the more precious to those with chronic illnesses. Take a few extra steps this season, guard your health and add health-conscious travel precautions to your trip checklist.

[Learn about how cancer patients can eat healthy during the holidays.](#)

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