

Oxygen While Flying on an Airplane

For reasons that are not entirely understood, air travel can precipitate attacks for individuals with cluster headaches. Current FAA regulations disallow passengers from traveling with their own oxygen canisters, but we have some information that we hope will be helpful.

If you have an attack in flight, it is possible to request and receive oxygen. The FAA requires all commercial US airlines to carry portable oxygen onboard their planes, reserved for use in the event of medical emergencies as determined by flight crews. While we know that a cluster attack is a medical emergency, flight crew members may not. For that reason, when asking a flight attendant for oxygen, it is recommended you say something like, "I have a neurological condition and am feeling unwell. When this happens, using oxygen helps. That's what my neurologist prescribes for me at home. May I please have some?"

Your distress will be evident, but if you are asked about the condition, consider NOT describing it as a "headache"; that term does not convey the severity of the pain and thus, it might not be considered an urgent situation. Instead, refer to it as trigeminal autonomic cephalalgia, the broader diagnostic term. Since flight crews are trained to take passengers' medical concerns seriously and airlines generally wish to avoid possible liability issues or unfavorable publicity or complaints by passengers filed with the FAA, your flight attendant will likely honor your request.

When you receive the canister, it will have tubing and a mask attached. Hold the air flow opening to your mouth to inhale, then move it away slightly to exhale. While the air flow is very slow, not anywhere close to the 15-25 L/min we are used to using at home, it has been reported as being effective for aborting pain via oral inhalation. You will most likely be permitted to keep the canister until just prior to landing, with refills as needed in the meantime.

As with all treatment strategies, this may work well for some and not for others. And, despite your best efforts, it is ultimately up to the flight crew to honor your request. But, we think it is an option worth considering if you are in crisis.

Alternatively, depending on the airline and its policies, it may be possible to pre-arrange for the use of oxygen canisters, some of which may offer up to 15 L/min oxygen flow (per your prescription), supplied in-flight by the carrier. The airline will provide a regulator and mask, but you might want to bring your own with you to have as a backup. Check with your air carrier well in advance of your reservation dates by phoning and asking to speak with a representative in their medical or special services department. That person will be able to assist with your request and provide you with any necessary forms needed by the airline. You should be prepared to provide the airline with a prescription from your physician and

to bring a copy of the prescription with you during travel, as you may be required to show it at check-in or en route.

A note for those who use portable battery-operated oxygen concentrators for respiratory illnesses: The FAA permits passengers to board planes with approved devices. Your oxygen supplier can assist you with obtaining an FAA approved device and any related documentation you may need to present to the airline at check in or to airport security personnel, and your physician will need to provide you with a prescription and letter of medical necessity that you should carry with you. After making your reservation, you will need to call your airline to notify them in advance that you'll be traveling with an approved concentrator.

The above rules and regulations apply to US air carriers only. Please keep in mind that FAA approval differs from FAA mandate. Every airline has autonomy to create its own set of rules regarding oxygen use. It's important to check with your airline regarding their policies.

Finally, if you would like to have oxygen available for use at your travel destination, it might be possible to pre-arrange for canisters to be delivered to you there. We are aware of one medical supply company that claims to be able to deliver oxygen to just about anywhere in the 50 states. Apria Healthcare is a national company with a travel department available for their oxygen customers. You will first need to establish an account with them by providing your prescription. If they offer service in your destination area, they will deliver supplies to hotels and private residences there. With advance notice, they will facilitate all delivery and return arrangements. If requested, they will provide you with a regulator, mask, and tubing, but we recommend having your own supplies with you as a backup. If you will be staying in a hotel, consider scheduling delivery for the day before you plan on checking in. Phone the hotel to advise them of the delivery so their staff will be prepared to accept it on your behalf; they will also manage the return. If you will be staying at a private residence, someone will need to be on site for the delivery and return. (Disclaimer: Clusterbusters is neither affiliated with nor endorses Apria Healthcare.)

Wishing you safe and pain free travels!