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FAMILY CAREGIVING

Tips for Hassle-Free Travel With Older Parents

Whether you're planning a vacation or a family reunion, preparation is key to ensuring a smooth journey

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Published June 21, 2022 | Updated June 03, 2024 • EN ESPAÑOL

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For caregivers who want to travel with older parents, the challenges of taking a trip can be great.

But so can the rewards, says Shonda Boulet, who provides in-home care services to older adults in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. To celebrate her 50th birthday and her mom's 70th, she arranged a special mother-daughter vacation.

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Although planning the trip took more time than if she were traveling alone or with girlfriends, she says the extra effort was worth it.

"There's no price tag on shared family experiences and happy memories," says Joy Loverde, author of *Who Will Take Care of Me When I'm Old?* and *The Complete Eldercare Planner*. "When my sister and I took my mom back to her hometown in Italy, ... we created a photo album that we presented to her later on. She relived those experiences over and over again, and so did we."

AARP's 2024 Caregiving Travel Survey found that roughly half of adult caregivers have avoided a personal trip with their care recipient because of the difficulties involved. To make it easier for caregivers and their loved ones to enjoy time with friends and family, here are tips to help you plan.

Air travel is quicker but has more chance for complications

Although flying is the fastest way to travel long distances, you'll want to prepare yourself for big terminals, security screening and boarding.

Fly direct. Book a direct flight if you can, Loverde says. Shuttling quickly between gates can be exhausting.

Plus, you face an increased risk of losing luggage. If a direct flight isn't possible, choose a long layover to give your loved one and your suitcases more time between flights.

Choose a prime seat. Book an aisle seat as close as possible to the front of the plane. That way your loved one is near a lavatory and the exit — and doesn't have to walk the long, narrow aisle toward the rear of the cabin.

Ask for wheelchair assistance. Even if your loved one is healthy and mobile, a gate can be a long way from the security checkpoint. The U.S. Department of Transportation requires that airlines provide wheelchair assistance to and from your gate, between gates for connecting flights and to baggage claim.

Although you can request wheelchair assistance upon arrival at the airport, you can arrange it earlier. Call the airline's customer service number or request help online when you book your tickets.

Make sure to request assistance at the other end of your flight too.

Inquire about early boarding. Most airlines will allow older travelers and their caregivers to board before most passengers if you request it.

Be prepared for the quirks of airport security

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) website TSA Cares has resources for passengers with disabilities and medical conditions, so you can prepare ahead of time for the security lines.

Call the TSA Cares call center at 855-787-2227 or send an email if you have questions you don't see addressed. Reach out at least 72 hours before departure.

To make things go as smoothly as possible during screening, make sure all medications and medical devices are labeled, and carry a signed doctor's note explaining your loved one's medical needs and conditions.

If standing is difficult, your loved one can ask to be screened while sitting.

Service animals must be screened. The animals go through checkpoints with their owner. Collars, harnesses, leashes and other accessories with little or no metal might make screening quicker.

External medical devices may need special attention. Feeding tubes, insulin pumps and ostomy bags are allowed but can be inspected. Tell the TSA agent your loved one has a device and where it's located.

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If removing the device is safe, send it through the X-ray machine. If that's not possible, your care recipient will need special screening.

More medicine is allowed. Although TSA generally limits aerosols, gels and liquids to 3.4-ounce containers, it permits larger amounts in reasonable quantities if they're medically necessary, such as inhalers or insulin. Be sure to declare them to your TSA agent before screening.

Medical equipment should be flagged. Syringes are allowed but injectable medication should be included. Declare them to the TSA officer before screening. Continuous positive airway pressure machines (CPAPs), nebulizers and similar devices are allowed in carry-on bags but must be removed from their cases for X-ray screening.

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Traveling with oxygen has special rules. If your loved one requires supplemental oxygen, TSA does permit oxygen cylinders but not in aircraft cabins.

You can bring your loved one's oxygen cylinder in checked luggage, but only if it's empty. You'll need to have it filled at your destination.

Typically, airlines allow portable oxygen concentrators, but check with the airline in advance to make sure your loved one's specific model is approved. You might also need to complete a special form and have your doctor sign it.

Some airlines provide oxygen service in flight, but many don't. Again, check with your carrier.

Mobility devices may face screening. Canes, walkers, wheelchairs and other mobility devices are allowed but expect inspections.

What if your loved one is flying alone?

If your loved one is healthy enough to fly without you, ask the airline to issue you a gate pass. You'll be able to pass through security and ensure that person boards the correct plane.

Show your ID at the ticket counter and make the request.

At the destination, whoever is receiving your loved one can likewise request a gate pass. To make sure things go smoothly, both you and your counterpart at the other end of the flight should contact the airline in advance to find out what's needed to obtain gate passes.

You may also want to request wheelchair assistance at both airports so your loved one has an escort to and from the plane.

Train travel takes longer but may be less stressful

Traveling by train allows you both to sit back and watch the view, but preparation is key to a smooth journey.

Reserve early. If you're traveling on Amtrak or another rail line, make reservations in advance — especially if your loved one uses a wheelchair, requires an accessible seat or needs an accessible bedroom for long trips.

Trains have a limited number of accessible seats and rooms.

Talk to an agent. Although railroads allow reservations online, reserve your spots by phone so you can discuss your loved one's needs with a booking agent. You can contact Amtrak at 1-800-USA-RAIL (1-800-872-7245).

Older adults, passengers with disabilities and caregivers are all eligible for discounted fares on Amtrak.

Ask about special needs. If your loved one uses oxygen, Amtrak allows both oxygen tanks and portable oxygen concentrators, while airlines allow only the latter. Call the rail operator in advance to inquire about weight limits for the equipment and other restrictions.

Request wheelchair assistance. Ask in advance for use of a wheelchair at the station or assistance from a uniformed Amtrak staff member to help your loved one get to the train.

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The staffer can help with boarding by using a bridge plate to fill in the gap between the platform and the train or by using station-based mobile lifts. They will even provide assistance to and from restrooms or with stairs. If you request it, your loved one will be among the first to board.

Research your train station. If your loved one has limited mobility, realize that even if trains are accessible, train stations might not be. Some stations lack elevators. Others might have elevators but those elevators could be out of service.

To make sure you have the most current information about the accessibility of the stations on your itinerary, look them up online or call to inquire.

Pack a picnic. Though long-distance trains offer meal service, the train you take may have a café car with limited options. If your loved one has special dietary needs, the safest option is to pack food for the two of you to enjoy.

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Road trips give you the ultimate flexibility

Visits of two to five nights to see family and friends in the U.S. are the most common trips, according to the AARP Travel survey. Traveling by car allows you to follow your own schedule, carry all you need and go at your own pace.

The most important advice for a road trip with your loved one is to leave early and stop often.

Add an extra day. That way, you can make as many stops as needed so your loved one can stretch and move around — important for preventing blood clots — use the bathroom or rest overnight in a hotel.

Look up rest areas. If your loved one has medical, mobility or special needs, plan your route with rest stops in mind. Rest areas have accessible lavatories for wheelchair users, thanks to the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).

State departments of transportation often have information about rest stop availability and accessibility on their websites, but it isn't always reliable. So, be prepared with a plan B in case a rest area is closed or inaccessible.

Upgrade your ride. If you have a small car and will be traveling a long distance, look into renting a larger vehicle that will be more comfortable for you and your loved one, says Loverde, who likes to rent an SUV, a van or even a motor home.

Quiz hotel managers about exact accessible features offered

Once you've done all the hard work of getting to your destination, you'll want a nice, quiet place to rest. If your loved one has special needs, a lot of legwork may be necessary to find a hotel that meets their requirements, according to Loverde, who says hotels often claim to offer accessible rooms but are vague about specifics.

"You have to be precise about special needs," she says. "Call the hotel and ask about elevators, and you have to ask about transport lifts or wide doorways. I always ask about bathrooms with grab bars — you've got to have that — and if the elder has a service dog, you have to find out if they're OK with that."

Federal law requires hotels to accept service animals, not to restrict them to rooms designated for pets and not to charge a cleaning fee for hair or dander shed.

Look for your hotel on a map. Be mindful of the hotel's location, says Boulet, who recommends looking to see where hotels are in proximity to places you plan to visit. A hotel that's accessible but inconvenient might create more problems than it solves.

Book early. Because most properties have only a limited number of accessible rooms, they may be reserved quickly. Make reservations as early as possible to ensure your loved one gets proper accommodations, Loverde says.

Make your stay safer. Make a safety sweep to remove or mitigate potential hazards. Pick up throw rugs and cords from floor lamps that may be trip hazards. Consider packing a night-light because many hotels don't have good illumination to the bathroom in the dark.

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Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.