

Handout 4

Mitch's Airplane Travel Tips

Mitch Sturgeon is a memoirist, blogger, and disability advocate. He has been a wheelchair user since 2008 due to multiple sclerosis. Mitch is the author of [Enjoying the Ride: Two Generations of Tragedy and Triumph](#), and he blogs at [Enjoying the Ride](#), or www.enjoyingtheride.com. He has traveled extensively in his wheelchair, both solo and with his wife, Kim. They have more than thirty wheelchair cruises behind them, and many more to come!

Checking in at the Airport

- Arrive at the airport two hours early.
- Explain your boarding process to the ticket agent, for example:
 - I will require wheelchair assistance to the plane.
 - I will need a straight-back chair to board.
 - I will be checking a wheelchair or other mobility device at the ticket counter or at the mouth of the airplane.
 - I do or do not wish to access my wheelchair or other mobility device at my layover.
- Request a waiver of bag fees by describing contents as “disability related equipment”.
- Be prepared to answer the ticket agent’s question about type of battery in your wheelchair or other mobility device — get this information from your device manufacturer
- Once checked in, proceed to security either independently, with your mobility aid, or with wheelchair assistance provided by the airport.

At the TSA Security Check

- Follow guidance at the [TSA- Disabilities and Medical Conditions webpage](https://tinyurl.com/w9rcbd65) (<https://tinyurl.com/w9rcbd65>).
- Wait in line at the standard security queue unless you have obtained TSA Pre-Check status.
 - To qualify for a TSA Pre-Check fee waiver, due to disability, call TSA Cares at 855-787-2227 or visit <https://tinyurl.com/w9rcbd65>.

At the Gate

- Immediately check in with the gate agent and review your boarding process again.
- Confirm with the gate agent that you will be boarding early.
- **If you will be checking a wheelchair at the mouth of the plane:**
 - Request to meet with the luggage handler who will load your wheelchair.
 - Familiarize the luggage handler with your wheelchair:

- How to engage and disengage the brakes.
- How to lower the seatback if that is your intention.
- Show them the Wheelchair Instructional Placard (see end of document).
- If the luggage handler cannot meet with you at the gate, have that same conversation with them at the plane door.
- While you wait to board, sit close to the gate desk so you don't miss announcements and so the agent can easily see you.
- Have your belongings gathered and ready to go on a moment's notice.
- When pre-boarding is called, proceed through the ticket stand and down the jetway.
- If the ticket agents are doing their job correctly, they will hold general boarding until you are safely seated on the plane.
- **If you are transferring to a straight-back wheelchair:**
 - Attach your Wheelchair Instructional Placard to the back of your wheelchair (see example).
 - Remove any detachable parts, place them in a backpack, and have them brought on the plane as carry-on items:
 - footrests,
 - headrest,
 - cupholder,
 - phone holder,
 - joystick controller, if removable, and
 - seat cushion — have someone carry this into the plane and place it on your assigned seat.
 - Protect any parts that can't be removed but might be damaged, by wrapping them in bubble wrap and securing them with duct tape.

Boarding the Plane

- If you are transferring to a straight-backed chair (also called an Aisle Chair):
 - With the assistance of your travel partner and/or airport employees, using whatever transfer methods and transfer aids (slide board, sling, etc.) are appropriate, transfer from your chair to the airport's straight-back chair.

- Using the seat belts on the straight-back chair, make your body as narrow as possible so that you don't bump into airplane seats as you are backed down the aisle.
- When you are lined up beside your assigned seat:
 - Raise the armrest on your airplane seat and the armrest on your straight-backed chair.
 - Using a method like what you used to transfer from your wheelchair to the straight-back chair, transfer from the straight-back chair to the airplane seat, which has your wheelchair cushion already in place.
 - Lower the arm rest on your airplane seat, buckle up, and relax.

Exiting the Plane:

- Prior to landing, confirm with the flight attendant how you would like your checked mobility device handled when the plane lands.
 - If this is a layover, and you want access to your wheelchair or other mobility device, explain that you will need it delivered to the mouth of the plane. This should only be attempted for significant layovers — greater than one hour in length.
 - If this is a layover, and you don't want access to your wheelchair or mobility device, but you do want wheelchair assistance to get from gate to gate, confirm this with the flight attendant.
 - If you are at your destination, indicate that you would like your wheelchair or mobility device brought to the mouth of the plane. Sometimes this request is not honored, and you will instead be reunited with your wheelchair or mobility device at baggage claim. When this is the case, let the flight attendant know if you will need wheelchair assistance from the plane to baggage claim.
 - Note that you should have already had these conversations with the ticket agent and the gate agent, and this should have been conveyed to the flight attendants and baggage handlers, so this should be a series of confirmations rather than requests. However, the flight attendant may need to take action to make it happen.
- Although you were first to board, you will be last to exit. I find this to be helpful because I don't feel the pressure associated with delaying people who are always in a huge hurry.
- Upon receiving your wheelchair or mobility device, inspect it for any damage. Identifying issues before leaving the airport can make the process of seeking compensation smoother.

Thoughts about Bathroom Usage on the Plane:

- If you can reach the bathroom on your own or with help from your partner or mobility device, you are in good shape.

- You may need to employ an onboard straight-back chair to reach the bathroom, but there are two considerations:
 - If once you arrive at the bathroom, you are unable to transfer to the toilet, then this is a moot point. Most airplane bathrooms are not accessible. A few of the larger planes are exceptions. You can ask when you book the flight.
 - Not all airplanes have onboard straight-back chairs. Ask when you book the flight. If the plane does not routinely carry a straight-back chair, you can request that one be added for your flight. The airline may or may not be able to honor this request.
- If the airplane bathroom is not an option for you, consider the following strategies, **but only after discussion with your personal physician.**
 - Limit food and fluid intake prior to departure.
 - Preemptively take over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medicine to reduce bowel urgency.
 - As an emergency backup plan, for men especially:
 - Consider a condom catheter system.
 - Consider using a [Uri Bag container](#), or similar, while seated, with a blanket over your torso for privacy.

Example Wheelchair Travel Placard

ATTENTION

CHAIR MUST BE MANUALLY PUSHED

- To push chair, first set the gray brake release lever DOWN.
- To lock chair in position, set gray brake release lever UP.

PLEASE DO NOT DROP

- This is an EXPENSIVE medical device.
- This chair weighs 289 pounds.
- It MUST be lifted from the rear wheel drives and front caster support arms.
- RECOMMEND 3 people to lift chair.

BATTERIES

The batteries are internal and are NiCad Dry Cells. The batteries are non-operational during transport.

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, call the owner's cell phone at 207-555-1212.

