

Can I travel by air if I have a heart problem?

According to **expert guidance** from the British Cardiovascular Society, the **majority** of people with heart and circulatory disease can travel by air safely without risking their health. However, you should **always check** with your GP or heart specialist as to whether you are fit enough to travel by air, particularly if you have recently had a heart attack, heart surgery or been in hospital due to your heart condition. This guidance provides your GP or heart specialist with information to help them advise you on your fitness to fly.

If you are given the go ahead to take a holiday that involves air travel, and think you will need particular assistance at the airport terminal or during the flight, you should let the airport or airline know well in advance. This may include help with your luggage or early boarding to the plane. Oxygen is available on most airlines, so if you are advised by your GP or other health professional that you need it during the flight, let the airline know well in advance.

The most stressful part can sometimes be getting to and from your holiday destination. There are lots of things you can do to reduce any problems you might get from travelling, such as:

- Planning your route and allowing plenty of time for whichever form of transport you are taking, so that you are not rushed
- Using bags and suitcases on wheels so that you don't have to carry heavy luggage

Air travel and medications

As a result of security alerts, you will be discouraged from carrying medicines and medical items in your hand luggage unless they are essential for the time in between when you check in for your flight and when you collect your luggage at your destination. All other medicines should be packed in the luggage that you will be checking in.

Check with the airport and airline you are travelling with for their up to date guidelines on carrying medication in your hand luggage. **If you're going to be changing flights and airlines during your trip, check the regulations with each airline and airport, as they may be different.**

If you need to, it is **safe** to use your **GTN spray** while you are on the plane, though due to recent security alerts you may be restricted in what liquid form medication you can carry in your hand luggage so check with the flight operator.

HEART HELPLINE

For information and support on anything heart-related



0300 330 3311

local rate number



bhf.org.uk

Phone lines open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday

This information is not intended to substitute the advice that the doctor or specialist can give you.

Air travel

Where possible you should carry enough medication to cover you for the time in between flight check-in and getting your luggage back. Your GP or pharmacist will be able to advise you on which medicines you need to take during that time. You may wish to allow a few more hours on top of your flight time. If any of your medicines is available in both liquid and tablet form, it is preferable to carry it in tablet form. If your medication needs to be refrigerated, your pharmacist may be able to give you advice on how to keep it cool during the flight, for example using a cool bag.

Make sure you have enough medication to last you throughout your holiday. Keep an up-to-date list of all your medication and doses in your purse or wallet, just in case you lose any of them, including the generic and brand name of your medications. You should get a letter of explanation from your GP regarding your condition, medications, allergies and any devices you have (eg. Pacemaker).

If you are flying through times zones, it may be difficult to keep to your pattern of taking your medications. Speak with your GP or Practice Nurse who will be able to advise you on how best to deal with this.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and air travel

What is deep vein thrombosis and why does it happen?

Deep vein thrombosis is when a blood clot develops in a vein. This usually happens when blood 'pools' in the legs. If the clot breaks away and travels to the lung, it can in some cause a pulmonary embolism, which can be fatal.

What are the symptoms of DVT?

The symptoms of deep vein thrombosis are pain and tenderness in the affected calf muscle, with swelling in the ankle of the same leg. If you get these symptoms after a flight, or after any long journey where your movement has been restricted, or within a few weeks of your journey, you should see your doctor as soon as possible. Treatment involves taking blood-thinning drugs such as warfarin or heparin, or both.

What are the risks of developing a DVT?

The risk of developing a DVT while travelling by air for most people is very low. If you have previously had a DVT or a clot in your lungs, or if you have recently had surgery under general anaesthetic, you have a higher risk of getting DVT than other people, and you should get medical advice before flying. If you are very overweight you also have a higher risk of DVT. Your doctor will give you advice on how to prevent a DVT while travelling by air based on your individual medical condition. If you have been advised to wear compression travel socks, it is important that you have your legs measured to help you to choose the right size. If the socks are very

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tight, they can do more harm than good. If you are at high risk of developing a DVT then a blood thinner injection – heparin- may be recommended by your doctor

How can I help to protect myself during a flight?

Wearing support stockings as described above is important if you have been advised to wear them. It is **not** recommended that you should take an aspirin to thin the blood before going on a flight, as there is no evidence that it can prevent DVT's during air travel and it may have side effects. However, if you take aspirin or warfarin regularly on prescription, you should continue to take this as directed by your doctor.

To make sure you don't put yourself at an unnecessary risk during any long-haul flights, the following simple steps will help you to avoid a deep vein thrombosis.

- Walk in the aisle at regular intervals, to stimulate the blood circulation in your legs.
- Make simple movements of your feet – flex and extend exercises for example - raising your toes while keeping your heels on the ground – for several minutes every half hour.
- Make sure you are hydrated before you fly. During the flight keep hydrated and avoid having alcohol, and limit drinks containing caffeine (such as tea and coffee). Instead, drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.

If you have any concerns about travel and your health, it is very important to discuss these with your doctor, who will be able to advise you on your individual condition.

For more information about help during your flight you might like to contact the Aviation Health Institute by calling **01865 715 999**, or by sending an email to info@aviation-health.org.

You can also visit their website at <http://www.aviation-health.org/>.

Air travel with a pacemaker or ICD (implantable cardioverter defibrillator)

If you have a pacemaker or an ICD you should take your **device identification/card** with you and inform the airport staff that you have a device inserted. If you are asked to pass through the security system, walk through at a normal pace and don't linger. Most modern pacemakers and ICDs are well shielded against outside interference and so interference is very unlikely, although the metal casing may trigger the security alarm. If a hand-held metal detector is used, it **should not be placed directly over your device for longer than is necessary and sweeping repeatedly over your device should be avoided.**

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The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) can provide you with further advice and information on the **safety aspects** of airport security systems when you have a pacemaker or an ICD.

If you have had a stent inserted in your coronary arteries or have a mechanical valve, you can safely walk through the security system as normal as they will not trigger the alarm.

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