

How to Travel with an Elderly Loved One

Holiday travel season brings the chance for seniors and their caregivers to visit out-of-state relatives, fly internationally, or just take advantage of off-season vacation rates at the best tourist spots. But ensuring a successful, relaxing trip for an elderly loved one requires a fair amount of planning and foresight before departure in order to accommodate special considerations for health or mobility issues.

Whether the trip calls for planes, trains, automobiles or cruise ships – in the United States or abroad – the best way to plan a vacation with an active senior is to anticipate several common challenges that many elderly travelers face and to be proactive in your trip preparation. For instance:

Arrange airport services ahead of time. If flying with your elderly loved ones, there are many options to make transportation easier including:

- Be sure to pick a seat on the airplane meant to accommodate disabled or elderly passengers.
- Make use of all complimentary wheelchair services, especially to assist your loved one from the plane to the gate and through the airport if a connection is required.
- If an elderly loved one is flying alone, call the airline to make sure gate agents will provide wheel chair service at every stop along the route.

The Transportation Security Administration will also make special arrangements ahead of time for elderly travelers needing assistance through TSA checkpoints. Be sure to dress them in comfortable, easily removed shoes, though for travelers 75 years or older, shoes can stay on while moving through a metal detector.

Beware of the “economy class syndrome” clots. For long plane flights, car rides or bus trips, sitting for too long can aggravate deep-vein thrombosis, or blood clots common in older travelers. If driving with a senior traveler, build several breaks into the trip to allow both the driver and the passenger to stretch their legs. On planes or buses, taking a few minutes to walk up and down the aisles can alleviate pain or swelling in the legs.

Prepare official documents ahead of time. Packing smart for a long trip applies to paperwork as well as clothes. Make several copies of a loved one’s important documents, including driver’s license, insurance information, credit cards, passport and boarding passes. Have the traveler keep one set of copies on their person, another in their luggage, another at home and, if possible, a copy of all the documents at the home of the family member who will take the traveler in during a vacation.

Plan ahead for medical needs abroad. Keep all medications separated in bags and packed together in the same freezer bag. Importantly, make sure copies of all prescriptions or doctor’s orders are contained within the same bag. Additionally, carrying a list of all medications and their instructions is helpful for not only families, but also healthcare professionals that might have to treat your loved one. Also, research which medical treatment facilities are closest to the hotel or home where the senior traveler will be staying, in case of any emergency.

Keep a light schedule. One of the biggest threats to a senior’s health while traveling, in addition to germs, is fatigue. Build in a day of rest on either end of a long flight so that your loved one can adjust to jet lag, which is harder to recover from the older a person gets. While in the vacation destination, be careful not to load up each day’s schedule, as risks for falls increase the more rushed a traveler is. This will also help to limit fatigue.

Guard against pickpockets. Thieves and pickpockets are a concern for vacations abroad, particularly in famous European destinations like Italy or Spain. Advise your loved one against wearing conspicuous, expensive jewelry and to carry cash in a concealed travel wallet rather than a bulky purse or wallet. If groups of children rush toward you, using a distraction with something like a cardboard sign, push past them; they are trying to avert attention while one of them picks your pocket. Be wary of strangers proactively offering you tours, assistance, or photo opportunities, as these are common schemes to force you to pay for services you thought were friendly and free. Finally, if accessing money from an ATM cover your pin code with your hand, be aware of your surroundings, and never accept help from strangers.

Be careful what you ingest. If unsure about the water supply, stick to bottled water. Food poisoning is a common travel hazard, especially for senior vacationers, so avoid places where the risks for undercooked food are common: buffets, peeled or raw fruits and vegetables, seafood, undercooked meats, and unpasteurized dairy products.

Traveling can be very rewarding, albeit stressful -no matter someone's age -so being proactive is key. When traveling with elderly loved ones, a little extra preparation goes a long way; plan ahead, and enjoy your vacation worry free and in comfort.

Do you have any additional traveling tips? Leave them in the comments below.