

Accessible Vacationing

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Quick Facts

- After a neurologic injury, be sure to check-in with your doctor(s) and therapists to get medical clearance and guidance before traveling.
- There is a lot to consider before traveling, especially if it's your first trip after an injury. Plan in advance and travel with family, friends or care providers when possible.
- There are a variety of resources, such as apps and websites, for accessible travel and lodging options to assist you with planning a trip.

With the weather getting warmer in Pittsburgh, you may be thinking about ways you can travel or take a holiday this summer.

Travel can be both exciting and stressful, with or without health concerns. If you have had a neurologic injury, such as a stroke or brain injury, there is potential for additional stress or uncertainty. First and foremost, check-in with your doctor to confirm it is safe to travel as it relates to your medications, precautions, and current status. Changes in altitude, atmospheric pressure, turbulence and lighting on planes, for example, may trigger new or recurring symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, fatigue, nausea or others, especially if you have had a recent brain injury. Be sure to also talk with your therapy team at NeuroAxis regarding your mobility and safety considerations before traveling for the first time since your injury. Recovery from a neurologic injury varies from person to person. Every individual has different risk factors and medical complications that may impact safety when traveling, especially flying by plane.

If you are currently having symptoms such as swelling or headaches, it is recommended to avoid travel until symptoms subside. If you are not having any symptoms or medical issues, the Stroke Association recommends waiting at least two weeks to fly following a stroke (Flint Rehab, 2019). It is important to note that studies have shown that air travel can increase the risk of

developing blood clots (Schreijer et al., 2006). Sitting for long periods of time can lead to blood clots in the legs (called deep vein thrombosis, or DVT) that can travel to other parts of the body and result in a life-threatening emergency (CDC, 2024). Additionally, lower air pressure on planes leads to less oxygen which can be a challenge for those recovering from a stroke or brain injury, as well as an issue for those with breathing difficulties or heart conditions (Flint Rehab, 2019).

Because of all these factors, if you have flexibility in your travel plans, it is recommended to wait 1-3 months post-injury before traveling and to always obtain clearance from your doctor beforehand (Flint Rehab, 2019).

Overall Considerations Before Traveling



Before traveling, plan ahead to ensure accessibility and safety, and to avoid unnecessary stress along the way. There are a variety of apps, websites, blogs, and online reviews to help find accessible options. See below for things to consider before traveling:

- Is it safe to travel after your injury? (check-in with your doctors and therapists before making a plan!)
- Where are you planning to go? Will you stay local to Pittsburgh or Pennsylvania, within the country, or international? Is the place you're going to accessible for your needs (especially consider bathrooms, lodging, tourist attractions, etc)?
- What mode of travel will you use? (e.g., car, train, bus, plane)

- What is your current mobility? Do you use a mobility device such as a wheelchair, walker, or cane? Are these devices in good working condition or do they need any adjustments before traveling?
 - You may want to consider bringing along things such as a folding cane, rollator and/or portable ramp if applicable to you and depending on the accessibility of your destination.
 - If you'll be traveling long distances you may need to consider renting a wheelchair or scooter upon arrival.
 - If you use a power wheelchair or other powered devices, bring backup chargers, battery packs, spare medical equipment, and if you're handy, a small toolkit to fix your wheelchair if issues arise.
- Pack copies of important medical documents and medications.
- Have a plan for what to do if an emergency arises while you're on vacation. For example, know where the nearest emergency room is at your destination. Consider using [Emergency Assistance Plus \(EA+\)](#), a 24/7/365 service to help travelers in emergency situations.
- If you are easily distracted, have issues with light and noise sensitivity, or experience memory issues, consider strategies in advance that you could implement to avoid stress and anxiety. You may want to make a plan with your therapists, doctors or trusted family and friends.
- If you have experienced issues with your speech, memory, and/or attention after your injury, consider traveling with someone to ensure your safety. If you have difficulties communicating, talk with your speech therapist for tips to best communicate with necessary personnel while traveling. Always have important addresses and phone numbers with you in case of an emergency.

Modes of Travel

There are different things to consider depending on if you are traveling by car, public transit, or plane. You will also need to consider the accessibility of where you are staying and the destinations you want to visit.

Traveling by Car

- If you are able to comfortably transfer into a car with family, friends or caregivers, will you also be comfortable for the duration of the drive? If not, or if you are unable to safely do a car transfer, you may want to consider renting a vehicle from car rental companies such as Hertz or Avis, so you can stay in your wheelchair for the duration of the trip, and/or take advantage of their other accessible features.

- Depending on the distance of your trip, consider how often you may need to stop for the bathroom or general rest breaks. Plan in advance to consider who will be able to assist you with this and research whether there are accessible rest stops along the way.
- If you get easily overstimulated, have a plan for coping strategies you can employ to reduce discomfort (e.g., listening to music, reading (avoid if prone to motion sickness), conversing with other passengers, etc.)

Traveling Without a Car

If you decide to do a ‘staycation’ in Pittsburgh or the surrounding areas, there are multiple options for accessible public transit if you do not have access to a car and want to stay relatively local:

- All buses, light rail vehicles, and the Monongahela Incline are ADA-compliant. Check out the Pittsburgh Regional Transit website for more details to plan your trip: [Transportation Options](#). Paratransit services such as [ACCESS](#) and [Freedom Transit](#) are options for individuals with disabilities when standard public transit is not possible.
- Train accessibility: [Accessible Travel Services | Amtrak](#)
- Ride-share options
 - [Go Go Grandparent](#) (Uber for seniors)
 - Some cities may offer accessible vehicles through ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft: [Uber WAV](#) and [Lyft Up](#)
- [Moovit](#) is an app that provides real-time information on the most accessible public transit routes in a variety of cities and countries.
- Check out last month’s blog on ‘Social Participation’ for links to accessible attractions in Pittsburgh!

Traveling by Plane

- Contact the airline you’ll be traveling with 72 hours to 1 week in advance regarding any assistance you may need, whether related to mobility, wheelchair service, vision, or hearing. For long-haul flights confirm the accessibility of the bathrooms on board.
- [TSA Cares](#) is a resource for travelers with disabilities, medical conditions and individuals to receive expedited assistance for the TSA screening process.
- The Air Carriers Access Act (ACAA) requires airlines to accommodate the needs of their passengers. For example, requesting preferential seating (request at least 48 hours before your flight), obtaining medical equipment such as a wheelchair, or receiving any type of assistance such as reading signage in the airport. Every airline is different, so be sure to check-in with the specific rules and accommodations before each flight (Learn more here: [The Air Carrier Access Act \(ACAA\)](#))

- With preferential seating, consider choosing an aisle seat and/or a seat close to the front of the plane and bathrooms for easiest access.
 - If possible, travel with a companion to help you with any challenges along the way. If you need to travel alone, contact your airline and inquire about passenger assistance programs.
 - If possible, choose a non-stop flight. If you have a connection, try to get more time in between flights so you don't have to rush. If this is the first flight since your injury, a shorter flight (3 hours or less) is recommended before considering a long-haul flight.
 - Take advantage of escort services which can provide wheelchair escorts and carts to help you get to your gate. Learn more about accessibility at the Pittsburgh International Airport here: [Accessibility - Fly Pittsburgh](#). If you are traveling to multiple airports, be sure to contact each one separately as they may have a different system to assist travelers.
 - Bring a carry-on with necessary medications, snacks, toiletries, and travel information. Otherwise, check-in as much luggage as you can to have less to carry in the airport.
 - Wear shoes that are easy to take on and off for security checks.
 - While flying, consider the following:
 - Stay hydrated, avoid alcoholic beverages, and bring your own healthy snacks
 - To prevent blood clots, consider wearing compression socks to improve circulation in legs, and when safe to do so, complete seated leg exercises (e.g., march in place, ankle pumps, extend your knees) or if possible, stand and walk around.
 - If you experience sensory overload, consider bringing dark glasses, earplugs, and/or noise-canceling headphones with soothing music to improve your experience on board.
 - Consider getting travel insurance in case of last minute changes. If traveling abroad, check to see what your health insurance covers at your destination.
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Lodging Considerations

In general, when selecting where you'll stay on your vacation, consider researching and asking about the following in advance:

- Width of doorways to determine if entrances are accessible for your mobility needs
- Accessibility of the bathrooms (e.g., are there grab bars, raised toilet seats, roll-in showers, etc)
- Elevator availability or ground-level options
- Presence of ramps and railings
- Restaurants and attractions close by - contact these sites directly for accessibility information

If the above information isn't clearly listed on the website(s), don't be afraid to call and/or ask for photos of the rooms and bathrooms to be as comfortable and confident as possible before booking.

Resources such as [AccessibleGO](#) or [Handiscover](#) allow individuals to search specifically for accessible hotels and vacation rentals. Airbnb also has accessibility filters for their properties: [United States Adapted Vacation Rentals | Airbnb](#).

Resources

- [wheelmap.org](#): crowdsourced information about accessible places around the world
- [AccessNow](#): allows users to review and find accessible venues in real-time
- Consider exploring travel blogs and forums run by disabled travelers to get first-hand experiences and reviews about places you want to visit

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