

## Travelling with the elderly: Know the risks

Is it safe for seniors to be travelling now? Or should the elderly hit the brakes on non-essential leisure travel plans amid the current pandemic?  
from Aged Care New Zealand Issue 2 2021

While cancelled plans are disappointing, it is understandable that many people don't want to take the risks and/or deal with the inconveniences that may accompany travel these days – irrespective of the reason.

Under today's current pandemic threat, seniors have a higher risk for severe illness if they contract COVID-19. People in their 60s or 70s are at a higher risk for severe illness than those in their 50's, for instance. And data shows that people who are 65 or older are at the greatest risk for severe illness from Covid 19.

Those with certain underlying health conditions are also at a greater risk for a serious case should they contract COVID-19. Several health issues that are common in older people, such as high blood pressure, cancer and diabetes, are on the list of comorbidities that can result in serious COVID 10 complications.

When it comes to travelling whether it's a simple vacation or moving a loved one state to state one needs to fully assess the risks to an elderly person's health care before making plans as COVID-19 is only one of the risks associated with travel.

Here are several tips on how to travel with an elderly person.

Frailty is a debilitating state where a loved one is weak, low in energy, and every movement is slowed down. Recently it has been acknowledged by the medical community that frailty is a medical condition and not simply someone 'getting old'. Those suffering in a fragile condition may also have chronic pain that would further affect their mobility issues, and could present a challenge for any form of travel.

As a caregiver one may be used to helping the older person with daily activities. Travelling is no different so don't forget the skills learned whether you are on the road or in the sky. For example, ask the person what they want and listen to what they say. Accommodating the small requests and ensuring they are comfortable will go a long way to ensuring a pleasurable trip for all.

### Know the risks of air travel

Air travel poses certain risks to the frail and elderly. Below is an abridged list that one should be aware of.

Hypoxia – this is essentially a change in cognition due to the changing air pressures. This is frustrating in that it can be undetectable except through magnetic resonance scans. One might sense something is off if the elderly person acts delirious during or after the flight.

Stroke – The leading cause of inflight death is cardiac related. If the older person has had a stroke in four or less weeks, they should not fly. The trip should be postponed (ideally until the patient is fit and well) or the trip should be made on the ground. Similarly, if they have had a myocardial infarct within three months, they should not be flying.

Deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism – in layman’s terms, if one sits for a long time one decreases blood circulation and increases the risk of blood clots. These clots may present later after the travel experience.

The Australian Centre for Disease Control (CDC) offers this advice for travellers, “air travel may increase a person’s risk for VTE (Venous thromboembolism) by two – to four fold”. They go on to point out other studies found:

“A similar increase in risk is also seen with other modes of travel, such as car, bus, or train, implying that the increase in risk is caused mainly by prolonged limited mobility rather than by the cabin environment”.

Effect on body gases – the pressure changes within the cabin also affect the gases inside a person’s body. Travellers should avoid carbonated drinks and gas-producing foods like beans, chewing gum, cabbage and brussel sprouts.

Ear and sinus problems – severe ear pain, tinnitus, or vertigo occurs in nine percent of air travellers. That statistic is for all ages, so the elderly has an even higher chance of being impacted. Any persons with a middle ear and sinus problems will have an extremely painful experience and possibly cause damage to their health.

Motion sickness – those in a frail condition are most prone to motion sickness. The sudden lift off and any turbulence along the way may leave them feeling nauseous. This can lead to dehydration and a host of other scenarios. Those travelling with them should plan ahead and administer any anti-nausea band or anti-nausea medicine prescribed by their doctor before boarding.

Other measures one can take is to pre-select seats away from the engines and closer to the plane’s centre of gravity (ie the inside seats slightly behind the wings). Some experts also recommend flying at night to reduce the visual elements.

Temperature regulation – aircraft tend to be highly air-conditioned to lower the risk of infection, so don't forget the simple items like light jackets to control the persons core temperature.

## Road Trips

When going on the road with an elderly person, carers need to remember the basics. Plan on frequent stops, every two hours. Sitting for a prolonged period is hard on the body and will increase fatigue.

It is likely that all travellers will need the restroom anyway, so plan on each of these stops adding an hour to the trip. The older person is moving slowly but you need to be sensitive to their health condition.

And last but not least, if there is any doubt about how the peso may be impacted by flying or driving long distances it might be a good idea to look into alternative travel services such as medical transport.

Ref: Aged Care New Zealand Issue 2 2021