

Lymphedema and Vacation

With the holidays around the corner some of you affected by lymphedema might be planning an extended road - or airplane trip. Getting to your destination may require hours of sitting, which causes a considerable slow down in the venous and lymphatic circulation, and fluid to pool in the extremities.

Air travel can be especially challenging for individuals with lymphedema and those at risk for developing lymphedema. In pressurized airplanes, the cabin pressure during flights is generally lower than the atmospheric pressure on the ground, which causes a change in pressure in the connective tissues. These pressure changes, combined with the pooling of fluid in the tissues may even cause swelling in normal tissues. It just makes sense that these travel-related issues may have even more serious consequences in individuals with a compromised lymphatic system.

To avoid the onset of swelling and to prevent the worsening of pre-existing lymphedema, it is recommended to wear a compression garment during air travel. In some cases it may even be necessary to apply additional bandage(s) on top of a compression garment. Compression increases tissue pressure and considerably aids in the prevention of fluid accumulation in the tissues.

While traveling with lymphedema does have some drawbacks and requires more planning, it should not stop you from taking a long awaited trip.

The following recommendations are intended to help your planning and make your trip more enjoyable:

Plan Ahead

- Seek the advise of your physician and your lymphedema therapist if there are any questions, specifically in regard to added compression during flights
- If you are an individual at risk for developing lymphedema, you should discuss with your physician and/or lymphedema therapist if it may be beneficial to wear a well-fitted compression garment, or short-stretch bandage(s) during the flight
- Check the quality of your [compression garment](#). If you have more than one garment, take the extra one with you as a backup. If your destination is located at high altitudes, you need to take the same precautions as for your flight
- Ensure that you can manage your luggage. If you travel with another person or a group, ask someone else to carry the luggage for you. Should you travel on your own, use a suitcase with wheels and don't lift your luggage from the baggage carousel with your swollen arm
- Carry your prescription medication with you; if necessary get your prescriptions filled before you leave to make sure they last you through your vacation. If your destination is located in hot or mosquito-infested areas, take precaution (sun screen, insect repellants, and antibiotics). Should you travel to a tropical country in which filariasis is endemic (especially during the wet season), talk to your doctor about special medication to take

with you. Take some antifungal powder with you – the bathrooms and showers in hotel rooms may be a source for infection.



Endemic countries for filariasis

- Bring skin lotion - the air in pressurized cabins is very dry
- If possible, request an exit seat, which gives you more legroom. Definitely request an aisle seat so you can get up periodically without disturbing the person sitting next to you
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and comfortable shoes that have been worn previously. If you have lymphedema of the leg avoid taking off your shoes during the flight
- Allow ample time to check in and reach your departure gate

During the Flight

- Wear your compression garments. It is also a good idea to wear an additional short stretch bandage on top of your garment to counter the effects of low cabin pressure – discuss with your therapist before you leave
- Drink plenty of water or fruit juices and eat lightly - the cabin air is very dry
- Ask somebody else to place your carry-on luggage in the overhead compartment
- Stand up and walk around the cabin as often as possible
- Do not place anything under the seat in front of you, so you can stretch and exercise your legs
- Elevate your arms as often as possible if you have lymphedema of the arm and bring a “squeeze” ball for muscle pump exercises
- If you have an open toe stocking, it is advisable to apply bandages on your toes and any other part of your foot that may be exposed
- It may be necessary to wear a glove (or finger/hand bandage) in addition to your arm sleeve. If you have a gauntlet without finger stubs, you may want to bandage your fingers
- Make sure to do some easy to remember muscle pump exercises (roll your feet, lift the heels and toes alternating, etc.). Ask your therapist what kind of exercises (s)he recommends during the flight

Arrival

- Do not remove your garment and any additional bandage materials before you reach your final destination

- Upon arrival at your destination, a shower and a nap should be your top priority. Make sure you moisturize your skin thoroughly after the shower. A few more exercises with your garments in place would be beneficial
- Should you spend a lot of time on the beach, make sure you wear sunscreen and cover your affected limb as often as possible. Wear rubber sandals in the water if you have lymphedema affecting your leg(s)

Additional Resources:

[National Lymphedema Networks position paper on air travel with lymphedema](#)

[The Role of Compression Garments](#)

[Lymphedema People](#)