

Fishy Luggage, Forgotten Pants and Security Mishaps: Lessons From My Air Travel Mistakes



Disclaimer: Although I write from the perspective of someone who doesn't use a wheelchair, many of these tips could be helpful to everyone. For those who use a wheelchair or other assistive device, which I realize can make travel more challenging, please check out the recent episode of [Ask an MS Expert](#) about air travel with MS, with excellent suggestions about traveling with a wheelchair.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Oh, my God. I am SO sorry." I was mortified. I had been trying to fit my daughter's suitcase into an overhead bin on an early morning international flight, but in the process, it slipped out and knocked a woman on the head.

Her partner was not amused. "WHAT were you thinking? Why didn't you ask for help?" he snarled. I was afraid he might bite me.

Those were the same questions I was asking myself, as I confirmed that the woman I had hit was neither bleeding nor unconscious.

"I'm so, so sorry. . . Are you OK? Oh, my God, I'm so sorry."

Air travel is hard. Air travel with MS is even harder. Mobility may be a challenge. You may have dietary restrictions or heat intolerance. Yet, if you love to travel like me, often flying is a necessary part of the process.

Here are some mistakes I've made and the lessons I've learned the hard way.

1) Don't knock anyone on the head. The corollary is, of course, ask for help. Be gracious and apologetic, but if you are not 100% sure you can lift your suitcase into an overhead bin or walk down the jetway unassisted, don't attempt it alone. If you're afraid you might spill your drink because of hand weakness, ask to keep the whole bottle or can. Consider bringing a straw. You don't have to prove anything – you don't even have to explain why you need extra help. It's OK.

2) Don't pack a bomb shell in your carry-on bag. I didn't think that the "trench art" vase I'd bought in Bosnia might cause problems at airport security, but when the agents pointed out that it was made from a bomb casing, I could see their point. Be careful about what you put in your carry-on bags. If you have prescription medicines, especially those that require a cold pack, make sure to have the printed prescription, a note from your doctor or something to indicate what the medicine is, to avoid any hassles. Check that your liquids meet the size restrictions. Visit the [National Multiple Sclerosis Society travel page](#) for more info and tips, including TSA links.

3) Don't wear shorts on the plane. Dressing in layers for plane travel is essential. In the summer, planes baking on the tarmac are often miserable for a heat-sensitive person with MS, but once you're in the air, the zealous AC can overcompensate. Be thoughtful about your travel-day clothes: wear sensible shoes (I am always stunned by the number of women in heels at the airport!), comfortable pants and a lightweight shirt, but make sure to bring a sweater or jacket in your carry-on.

4) Don't get putrid fish juice all over your checked luggage. I didn't know that commercial airlines ever carry frozen fish alongside passengers' checked bags, but when we picked up our bags in San Diego for a family vacation a few summers ago, all four were soaked with stinky water that had spilled out of a container with dead fish. We spent the first day of vacation doing laundry and part of the week suitcase shopping. On nearly every flight since, we have carried on all of our bags and avoided further fish juice incidents.

5) Don't arrive at the airport 15 minutes before your flight takes off. This wasn't entirely my fault, but on a business trip a couple of summers ago, the airline (the same one, incidentally, responsible for the fish juice) canceled my flight and rebooked me at an earlier time. I wasn't notified until the last minute and I nearly set a new Sacramento-area record for fastest run from drop-off to jetway. Although I made the flight, I was a flustered wreck by the time I sat down. Those of us with MS don't need that extra stress. Give yourself plenty of time

to get to the airport, get through security, use the restroom and grab a snack before getting on the plane.

6) Don't forget your pants. Once I left for a 3-day business trip wearing casual capris and forgot my professional black pants at home. Why? Because I didn't make a packing list. With most trips, I make one and stick to it. I save my lists so now I have one for almost any type of trip: beach, mountains, visit to in-laws, New York City or Beijing. I'm covered. I make minimal adjustments, stick to the list and can usually fit everything into my carry-on bags, avoiding long delays at airports to retrieve my stuff.

The most important lesson is to take care of yourself when flying. Bring extra snacks on the plane and, for a long flight, cozy socks, earplugs and an eye mask. Stay well hydrated. Plan recovery days for both your travel destination and when you come home. Avoid temptations such as free alcohol on international flights and endless inflight entertainment when you should be sleeping. Have a backup plan in case your flight is delayed or canceled.

The benefits of travel usually outweigh the difficulties. Don't let MS – or any chronic condition – be an excuse to stay home. Make the necessary accommodations and then go see the world!