

# Travelling with a disability Guideline

CBM International | Global Health, Safety & Security Unit  
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# Guideline on travelling with a disability

This guideline was prepared in close cooperation with CBM travellers with a disability and others who travel together with a person with a disability. Their experiences/testimonies have been collated using a series of guiding questions.

## Who is this guideline for?

This guideline targets travellers with a disability and personal assistants (PA) of travellers with a disability. In addition, this document is useful for anyone who is travelling together with a person with a disability.

## What is the objective of this guideline?

The aim of this guideline is to raise awareness and help to better prepare for trips. The guideline also gives first-hand advice and best-practice recommendations from persons with a disability for persons with a disability.

## Challenges a person with a disability may face when travelling

### Booking hotels, trips, food, and taxis:

For a person with a disability using a wheelchair, it is recommended not to ask a hotel if the rooms are accessible. The reason is that the answers might be just a "yes" or "no" answer, which means little.

- It is better to ask in detail about the facilities, and to let them describe the access. For example, one can ask if there are steps to go to the rooms, bathrooms, to the restaurant or where the elevator is located, if any. Then it can be decided if the hotel suits one's needs in terms of accessibility. Also ask others who have been there before.
- When traveling with a power chair, taxis are a challenge because it needs a taxi with a lift that can fit the power chair and the person seated on it. When using a manual chair, it is easier to use any taxi. The person in the wheelchair may ask the driver to help transferring him or her to the taxi; most drivers will be willing to do so.
- Using a power chair, one needs to consider the accessibility of trains, buses, taxis and buildings. Wheelchair users always have potential challenges in restaurants with access to tables (table legs and table height can prevent access). The same applies to desks in hotel rooms – very few are spacious and accessible, even in so-called 'accessible' rooms, making working difficult.

## Traveling by air:

- It is good to arrive **at least** two hours in advance to the airport to ensure time to deal with any wheelchair-related issues.
- For power chair users, it can be helpful to have a letter from the manufacturer showing that batteries are dry or gel, not at risk of spilling, and therefore safe to travel (usually needs to be approved when booking).
- It is fine to insist to stay on your own wheelchair right up to the gate, so that if there is a delay, comfort and safety are ensured.
- Wheelchair users should discuss with check-in staff where best to sit in a plane to enable easy access to the toilets.
  
- If traveling without a PA, you may encounter reluctance from airline staff to assist you in getting to and from the facilities. It is worthwhile discussing this with your travel agent.
- When possible, an upgrade to a business class seat will enable slightly better manoeuvrability in the confined spaces of an airplane.
- When traveling with crutches in high security area clearly show to officials that you are using crutches as, in a high tension situation, they may be mistaken for a weapon. Pass them through the x-ray machines as well.

## General travel tips:

- Using bathrooms may be a challenge when traveling. Depending on the destination, it can be wise to bring along a hoist. It is important to know the right term or word (in the local language) or to use pictures to make sure it is understood by all.
- When staying at an accessible hotel, ensure to keep the name and address of the hotel in case of future travels in the same place.
- Carry a letter or cards with useful information written on it (local language) such as the address, the name of the destination etc.
- Always anticipate to spend a lot of time and plan for delays.
- When traveling with a PA, start visa applications early. A last minute PA visa refusal could seriously hinder your travel plans.
- Research the area and the country setting before you plan to travel there including cultural perceptions of disability, support services etc.

*"When on board an airplane ensure you store your crutches where you can easily reach them and they do not get stuck under other luggage. Or pass them to a cabin assistant."*

### Consider:

- The available means of transportation per location.
- Possible discrimination which can be faced by persons with a disability. When possible, book direct flights or with few stop-overs. When this is not possible, take flights which can be rebooked and with enough time between changes/ stop-overs.

Practical **Factsheets** with general travel safety advice can be provided by the CBM Global HS&S Unit.

## **Traveling with a personal assistant (PA)**

In case a person needs a personal assistant for physical tasks or psychosocial support, some extra issues should be considered. In the situation of an incapacitated PA (e.g. PA getting sick during travel), one could manage by asking colleagues and hotel staff for help. Depending on the location (or the skill level required for support tasks) one may need to consider returning home early. It could also be organized that other people help with tasks that the PA normally does.

Plan carefully as there have been reports from travellers with a disability that were not allowed to board a flight without a PA. This varies from airline to airline and, in the area where you (frequently) travel, you may gradually find airlines that provide best services in this regard.

*“Consider a self-defence training. It may be a good way to gain self-confidence and mentally prepare for trips and possible challenges regarding perception of disability and vulnerability.”*

### **Do insurances include PA or not?**

Personal Assistants should travel with their own medical, theft and repatriation insurance. Both the PA and the person with a disability should carry all details of each other's insurance (policy number and insurance 24/7 telephone number) so that if one becomes ill, the other can contact the insurance for support.

It is worthwhile to inquire with your insurance company - before traveling - whether replacement support services of a PA are paid for and whether the insurance company could help find a replacement.

### **Responding to a security incident: crime or attack**

It is recommended not to resist in case of an attack or theft. Let any assailant take whatever valuables they want. Your wellbeing and safety are the priority. To be able to respond to a security incident in the safest way possible, the PA and the person with a disability are recommended to partake in a S&S training. When preparing for travel, spend enough time to discuss and reduce risks as much as possible. Consider risks, threats and possible additional vulnerabilities as a person with a disability (as well as mitigating measures) for each visited location. Where needed, questions in this regard can be asked during a (remote) pre-departure travel briefing with the CBM IO HS&S Unit or region based S&S staff.

## **Responding to an incident: fire or evacuation situation**

When arriving in a hotel or a conference centre, evacuation routes, fire escape, exits, location of firefighting equipment, telephones etc. should be noted and checked.

Staff traveling together with a person with a disability should discuss how each would respond to an incident and what s/he may need during an unexpected situation.



A hearing impaired person e.g. may not hear a fire alarm or the sound of gunfire or an explosion. A visually impaired person may not see a flashing alarm light or see directions being provided with hand gestures.

In your own office, regularly practice evacuation drills with colleagues especially if you need a special evacuation chair. Ensure that crisis assembly points are accessible and well-marked.

## **Responding to a natural disaster: earthquake or typhoon**

On arrival in an area prone to natural disasters, explore your direct environment (alone or with your travel companion). Make sure that you know how to safely exit a building also when there may be debris in the corridors. Where deemed useful, ask hotel/conference centre staff to show you around.

Explain to hotel staff what you need in case of an emergency, e.g. when you can't get out of bed alone. Consider also that in an emergency the lights may be out and there may not be any electricity to use an elevator.

Detailed advice on this subject is provided in factsheets that can be requested from the CBM IO HS&S Unit.

**Be very specific about what you need, what you expect, what you can organize for yourself and what you request others to organize for you.**

When alone (in your hotel room), plan carefully to reduce the amount of external help required. But if help is needed, people are always happy to do so, if asked in the right manner.

For example when you travel by train/airplane/car, be very clear what you (or your PA) organize yourselves and what you request from the host party at your destination. **Don't expect things to be arranged.** Carefully plan and agree.

Consider things like:

- How will I get from one train/airplane into the other? What if I miss a connection?
- Do I have telephone numbers to call for support (or announce a delay)?
- How will I cope with different languages?
- Who can I call if I need support in the evening?
- Will there be a dedicated parking place for my vehicle close to the entrance?
- Will the taxi be able to accommodate my wheelchair?
- Are hotels, restaurant and lavatory accessibility during travel?
- Can support equipment (e.g. hoist) be arranged/rented and can these be placed in the hotel room?
- How will you or who will pay for extra services required?

After completing your travel, discuss what went well and where things should be adapted next time. Share this with the IO HS&S Unit and local S&S staff too. Store useful telephone numbers e.g. good taxi companies or places where you can rent equipment.

## **Access to medical treatment**

Travellers often have medical needs. Therefore, it is recommended to ensure that in each location where you travel, you know the telephone number of a doctor and / or pharmacy (consider language). Research in advance which hospital you could go to should you need medical treatment. Generally the CBM representative where you travel is able to provide you with such information.

When depending on a PA, this person should be very knowledgeable on specific medical needs of the person with disability. Having people who basically know how to stay calm and rational is an important priority as well.

Remember to have a (contextualised) first-aid kit at all times in your travel bag. Ensure you have sufficient spare medication should a trip unexpectedly get delayed.

### **What if a vital travel item disappears, is stolen / broken, or does not turn up at the airport of arrival?**

Consider carrying spare parts if these are small. Carry a multi-tool, such as a *Leatherman* in your check-in luggage so you or your PA can do small repairs yourself. Take sufficient time at check-in to ensure vital items are packed/wrapped/sealed well so that they don't get damaged in transport. Where applicable, ask for 'fragile' stickers and mark check-in pieces.

Consider calling your airline in advance to discuss your dependency on e.g. your own wheelchair and ask how it can be ensured it is handled with care and transported safely.

Most airports will be able to provide a wheelchair but for many users these are not very comfortable for using during a long waiting period.

Always carry photocopies of your and of your PAs passports, vaccination certificates, insurance details and a full contact list specific to the current trip (with details of people, organizations, embassies at the destination and emergency contacts at home). It is recommended to have this as soft copy too.

Ensure that essential items (medication, ID, key documents, communications equipment and laptops incl. charging cables) is carried in your hand luggage.

So, if main bags are lost en-route, one can - in theory - manage without these and seek to replace missing items.

### **What if a carefully planned trip is interrupted, or does not go as planned?**

It is important to rely on PAs or fellow travellers who are able to remain calm during stressful situations. Even the best travel plans are interrupted. One should expect it and have contingency plans for any eventualities. As long as nobody suffers, it should be treated as part of the 'joy of travel'. If it is an interruption which can have serious consequences then, until it has been dealt with, travellers must enhance their awareness to all risks to prevent further 'derailment'.

If travel plans change, directly inform people who are expecting to see you or hear from you.

## Paying for (unexpected) costs during travel?

It is advised to carry two credit cards (MasterCard and Visa) in case one is not accepted. Where applicable, also carry a work credit card. Carry some hard currency and an appropriate amount of local currency in small denominations. These should be divided up and spread around the body/wheelchair/rucksack, in two or three places. If one batch is lost or stolen, you still have a back-up. The PA should do the same – s/he has his/her own credit card, his/her own money, and often carries some of the other persons' money when working.

Where possible, use hidden places on a wheelchair to virtually guarantee that a robbery won't be a disaster. Remember to remove it before giving the chair to airport staff!

Depending on hotel security, leave passports and one credit card plus some cash in the hotel safe.

Changing money can also be a challenge for visually impaired persons. The best is to make sure there is a trusted person to assist and ensure there is no cheating or theft during the transactions.

*Testimony: "I have noticed that, in many developing countries, particularly in Africa, children would want to try your crutches as a game. It is better not to allow them to do so, even if it comes from a genuine curiosity from them...in many culture it could be seen as bringing bad luck to the child who tries for example, and the parents may react in a negative way."*

## Cultural perception of disability

In some cultures it is common to hear that people perceive disability as a curse or punishment. However, in most places, often especially so in remote places, it is also very common to experience great hospitality.

In fact, because people are so much more used to seeing disability and because they are used to help infirm family members (eg grandparents), people are much more likely to offer help. This willingness to help can be good, but can also be annoying to travellers who like to be independent. It is important to be relaxed when, all of a sudden, you discover that someone has decided to grab your wheelchair and move you to where they think you want to be.

On the whole, people in less-wealthy countries are more ready to physically help (lifting you over obstacles, up steps etc) and are better at it as a result.

*Testimony: "I've often been lifted in and out of boats in my chair by 4-8 guys with no feeling of danger."*

An advice would be to always be polite, but firm on the type of help required. Do not be afraid to clearly describe or explain what you need. This will help other people to better support you.

Talk to other persons with disabilities that have travelled to your destination before you or that live there. Ask for advice and helpful tips. You should also share learnings after your trip. When this concerns your health, safety or security always give feedback to the HS&S Unit.

## How can I (and my PA) prepare for challenges?

We encourage you (and your PA where applicable) to participate in a CBM S&S training. We include specific disability simulations into the training as well as role play components. We also have a dedicated topic on what to carry with you on trips. Dedicated pre-departure travel briefings, with a disability inclusion component, are available from the CBM IO HS&S Unit.

When experiencing an incident or a 'near miss', talk through what went wrong and how to avoid it in the future. Always report it to CBM HS&S staff.

CBM has a dedicated crisis hotline available for its travellers caught up in a serious incident with direct support available around the clock.

## Sharing learning

Should you want to add your personal input into this document, kindly contact us by email [HSSunit@cbm.org](mailto:HSSunit@cbm.org)

We'd love to hear from you and incorporate what you have found to be important. Via this above email address you can also register your interest to participate in a **Disability Inclusive S&S training** or host one in your location.



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