

Traveling with PD

Recently, while taking a flight from Cincinnati, I arrived at the airport 90 minutes ahead of the scheduled flight. After my ride dropped me off, I realized that my terminal was actually close to a half-mile away. “I can do that,” I heard myself say, and I started walking.

As with most well-intentioned people with Parkinson's, I overestimated how far I could walk. After suffering a complete emotional breakdown in the middle of the terminal, I was rescued by airline personnel who generously held the flight for me. But I soon found this to be a mixed blessing. Imagine getting on a plane with angry people who had tight schedules and connecting flights to make, glaring at you for holding them up!

I tell this story because it shows how important it is for a person with Parkinson's disease to anticipate the difficulties that arise while traveling. Here I share some tips to help make your traveling more pleasant.

Getting there

The general rule is that problems of all sorts can happen at any time, whether your travel is by plane, car, boat or train. To minimize them, begin by requesting special assistance at the time you make your reservations. Airlines and most other major modes of transportation will go out of their way to accommodate customers with “special needs.” Repeat your needs several times. For example, if you need an electric cart or wheelchair service, tell the ticketing agent, then tell the airline representative when you are boarding the plane and then give the flight attendant a friendly reminder just before you land. Do not just assume that you “may” be functioning well later — it is better to be safe than sorry and have the necessary accommodations in place.

Another tip for the planning period: while making reservations for a plane or boat trip, ask about parking for your car. Many facilities offer free parking if you display a “handicapped” placard or license plate. If you are flying, be sure to get to the airport two hours before the flight to avoid a situation like my “Cincinnati Incident!”

Important details

To keep your travel plans straight, carry a printed itinerary, complete with emergency contact information, on your person. Leave a copy of this at home with a friend or relative in case they need to reach you. If you are traveling overseas, be sure to have the address and contact information for the US Embassy. It is wise to have your passport on you at all times or locked in a hotel safe.

If you use a wheelchair or other mobility aid, confirm that your hotel room is wheelchair accessible. Inquire about special

accommodations that most hotels will offer at no extra charge, such as shower seats. Also, confirm wheelchair accessibility ahead of time for the sites that you know you will want to visit.

Packing

A case of nerves about having forgotten something will ruin days of a vacation, making PD symptoms worse. Efficient packing can make a big difference, so be sure to make a checklist of the essentials — passports, tickets, money and special items — beforehand. Sort out your outfits complete with socks, undergarments and shoes. Include Parkinson's-friendly clothing and accessories, such as wrinkle-free items with elastic waistbands, pull-overs or closures other than buttons for ease in dressing.

Toiletries and personal hygiene items are easier to handle if you have a compartment-type bag to put them in. The best ones are bags that can hang on the back of a door, providing easy access to each compartment.

Managing your meds

Keeping your medications in check can be a crucial factor in enjoying a successful trip. Always take extra medicine to avoid being caught shorthanded and keep your medications with you at all times. Bring a bottle of water to help you take your pills, as well as a light snack to help prevent nausea.

If you do run into a situation where you are without meds, a local pharmacist can give you an emergency prescription to last you one-to-three days. To help the pharmacist, travel with an updated list of your medications, along with dosages, your medication schedule and notations of allergies. This information will also be essential if you end up visiting a doctor's office or emergency room when on vacation. If you experience motion sickness, check with your pharmacist for interactions before taking anti-nausea medication.

Enjoy!

Now that you have planned everything in advance, enjoy your well-deserved vacation. Make sure your sightseeing schedule is flexible, and build in mini-rests and one nice nap every day. Take needed assistive equipment (such as a walker), and always take a cane or walking stick. When driving or riding, stop frequently to stretch or walk around, as well as for bathroom breaks.

Traveling does not have to end when Parkinson's advances. Enjoy yourself!

Peggy Willocks has lived with Parkinson's disease for 12 years. She resides in Johnson City, Tennessee, and is a former elementary school principal.

If you have or believe you have Parkinson's disease, then promptly consult a physician and follow your physician's advice.

This publication is not a substitute for a physician's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease or for a physician's prescription of drugs, treatment or operations for Parkinson's disease.