



Wheelchair Travel Guide

Improving participation in people with mobility deficits

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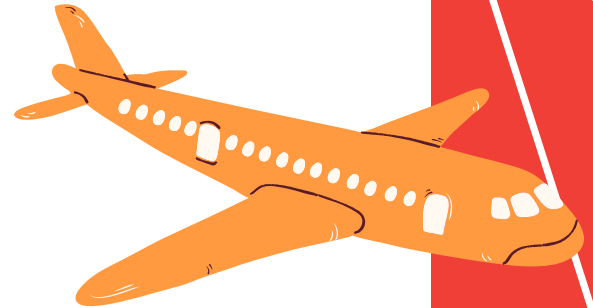
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Wheelchair Travel Guide: At a Glance

Purpose

The purpose of this educational resource is to provide information on traveling with a wheelchair. The focus will be on air travel, as this is the least accessible form of transportation for wheelchair users.¹⁻⁵ Traveling with a wheelchair can add another level of stress on top of the baseline stressors of traveling. Often, participating in activities related to air travel are fear provoking for families and individuals with mobility deficits. There is no reason why people with disabilities need to be excluded from participating in travel.

This guide aims to decrease the fears surrounding traveling with a wheelchair by informing readers and providing tips and tricks. The hope is to improve overall participation in this population.



Common Barriers & Issues

Despite many environments growing more accessible, the *air travel* environment has remained *disproportionately inaccessible*. This results in higher levels of social isolation and transport disadvantage.¹⁻⁵

Regardless of age, people with disabilities make fewer trips per day; 70% of people with disabilities reduce their travel because of perceived inaccessibility.⁶

WHY?

- 1 • Airline travel is the *only* type of travel that requires WC users to *transfer out of their personal mobility devices*.⁷
 - The aisles are too narrow to be navigated by personal WCs, so a temporary WC must be used to transfer from the gate to the airline seat. This WC has been described as low quality and uncomfortable.³
- 2 • *Lack of global standardization*: different countries have different regulations surrounding persons with reduced mobility. This creates a barrier to traveling out of the country.¹

3

- *Inaccessible bathrooms*

- Currently, single-aisle planes (majority of U.S. airplanes) are not required to have accessible bathrooms. ^{2,4,5}
- If there's no accessible bathroom on board, WC users either: ^{3,8,9}
 1. Refrain from drinking or eating before the flight so they won't have to use the restroom
 2. Try to discreetly void into container at seat
 3. Catheterize with leg bag or other device
 4. Have someone carry them into the bathroom if feasible

4

- Fear of *wheelchair damage*: Between December 2018 - May 2022, airlines have damaged or lost nearly 26,000 wheelchairs and scooters. ²

- In July 2022: 1,131 wheelchairs and scooters were reported damaged, which was 1.67% of all wheelchairs and scooters enplaned. ¹⁰
- The percent of wheelchairs damaged in July 2022 by airline: ¹⁰

Spirit	7.7%
JetBlue	6%
American	2%
Southwest	1.9%
United	1%
Delta	0.8%
Hawaiian	0.6%



KEEP READING FOR WAYS TO
OVERCOME THESE BARRIERS

Future Policy Change

What to look for in the future ...

- *Accessible bathrooms!* ^{9,11}
 - On March 18th, 2022, the U.S. Department of Transportation published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM)
 - This rule would require airlines to make at least one accessible lavatory on new single-aisle aircraft with 125 or more passenger seats
 - An accessible lavatory must be large enough to allow a passenger with a mobility deficit to approach, enter, use all facilities in that lavatory, and to exit using the aircraft's onboard wheelchair.
- Being able to *remain seated in a personal wheelchair onboard the plane!* ⁷
 - In 2018, U.S. Congress mandated the U.S. Access Board to study (1) the feasibility of aircraft in-cabin wheelchair restraint systems, and (2) if feasible, the ways in which individuals using wheelchairs, including power wheelchairs, can be accommodated with in-cabin wheelchair restraint systems.
 - In 2021, The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine performed and published a preliminary assessment.
 - The good news: it's possible! They didn't identify any technical issues that would make it impossible
 - The not so good news: the cabin modifications necessary to provide the space and structural support are of moderate technical complexity and would require substantial effort.
 - What next?
 - "The committee called for a road map — ideally led by the U.S. Department of Transportation — that defines and prioritizes decisions and follow-on work related to system engineering and design, standards and regulation development, and airline service personnel training." ¹²

Airline Passengers with Disabilities Bill of Rights **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!**

(FROM THE U.S. DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION)

1. The Right to Be Treated with Dignity and Respect.
2. The Right to Receive Information About Services and Aircraft Capabilities and Limitations.
3. The Right to Receive Information in an Accessible Format.
4. The Right to Accessible Airport Facilities.
5. The Right to Assistance at Airports.
6. The Right to Assistance on the Aircraft.
7. The Right to Travel with an Assistive Device or Service Animal.
8. The Right to Receive Seating Accommodations.
9. The Right to Accessible Aircraft Features.
10. The Right to Resolution of a Disability-Related Issue.

For more information, head to:
<https://www.transportation.gov/airconsumer/disabilitybillofrights>

TRAVEL BY PLANE





Booking Info

- No matter which airline you purchase your ticket from, be sure to **select the box for assistance** when booking.
- If booking through a **third-party site**:
 - Priceline.com does not give an option to select assistance. In this case, contact the airline directly after booking to request assistance.
 - Expedia.com and Travelocity.com do allow you to request assistance, but they also suggest contacting the airline directly to confirm requests.
- If you have to book travel with connecting flights, try to book **layovers with at least 90 minutes** to make sure you have enough time to transfer between gates.¹³
- If choosing a seat, keep in mind that **bulkhead seats** (typically the first row in any class of service) have **immovable armrests** which make transfers more difficult.⁸
- If trying to decide between airlines, consider the statistics on wheelchair damage (see page 3).

After Booking

- Under the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) and DOT's disability policies, passengers are not required to provide advanced notice for "disability-related accommodations", however, it's recommended to **call your airline in advance** to arrange for accommodations. ¹³

ASK ABOUT:

1. Accessible seating (removable arm rests if you need to be transferred)
2. Pre-boarding
3. Accessible bathrooms
4. Wheelchair transportation/storage



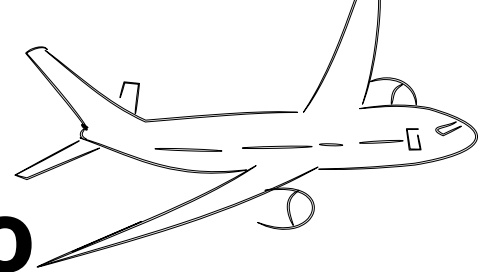
- The airline uses a **special service request (SSR) code** to keep track of assistance requests and assign staff accordingly. It's beneficial to know which code you need when you call. ⁸

Special Service Request Codes

SSR Code	Description of Assistance
WCHR	Wheelchair assistance required; passenger can walk short distance up or down stairs
WCHS	Wheelchair assistance required; passenger can walk short distance but no stairs
WCHC	Wheelchair required; passenger cannot walk any distance and will require the aisle chair to board
WCOB	On-board aisle wheelchair requested (for use during flight)
WCMP	Passenger is traveling with a manual wheelchair
WCBD	Passenger is traveling with a dry cell battery-powered wheelchair
WCBW	Passenger is traveling with a wet cell battery-powered wheelchair.

Airline-Specific Info

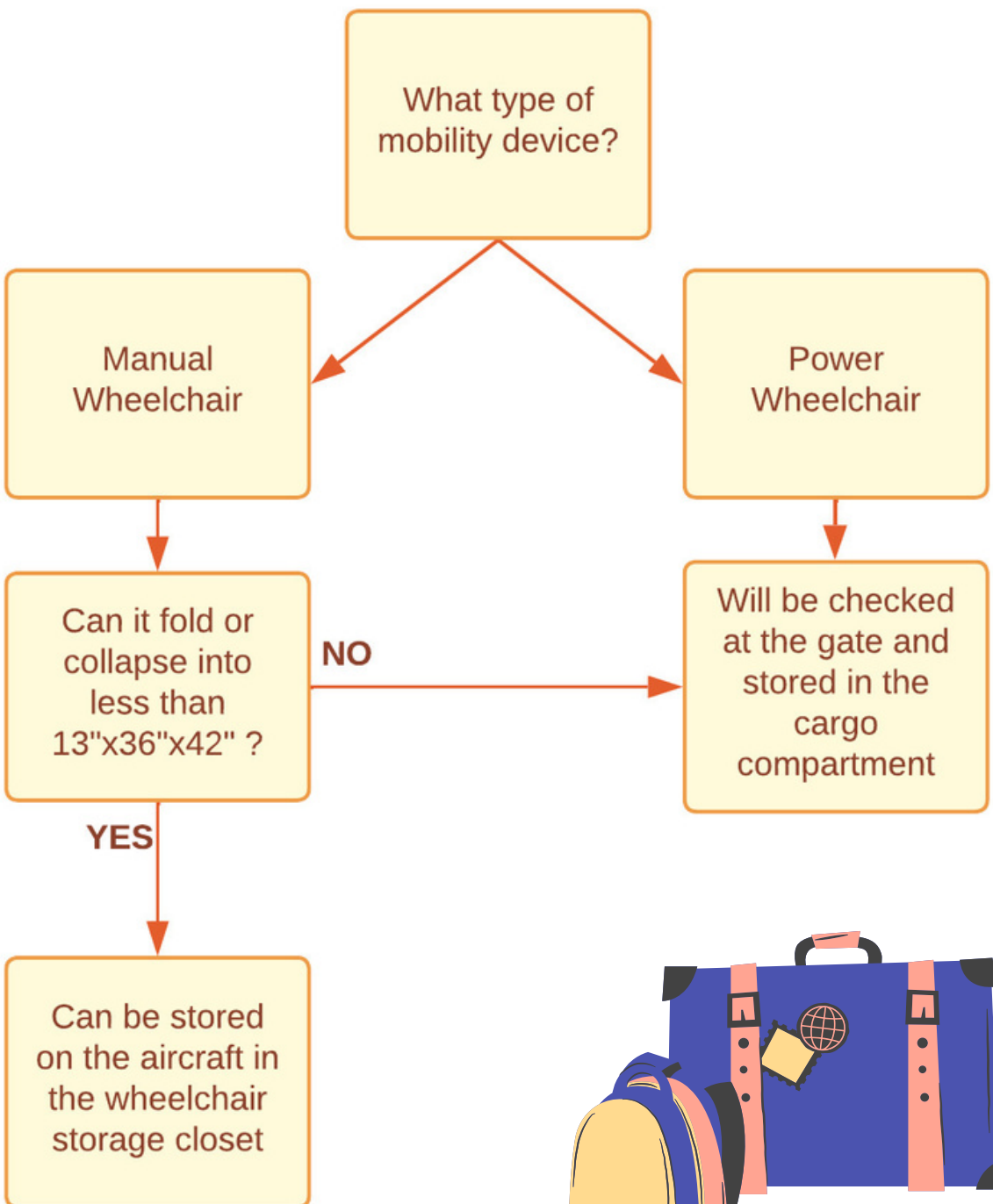
Contact info for major U.S. airlines



Airline	Phone #	Notes
United	1-800-228-2744	Request assistance online or over the phone; Includes helpful online resources including a "Will my WC fit on the plane?" calculator
American	1-800-237-7976	Request assistance online or over the phone; Must call if traveling with battery operated mobility device
Southwest	1-800-435-9792	Request assistance online or over the phone; Helpful FAQs online, good resource
Delta	1-404-209-3434	Request assistance online or over the phone; See website for helpful info
JetBlue	1-800-538-2583	Contact (call the #) right after booking to add an SSR
Alaska	1-800-503-0100	Request info online or over the phone; Video resources on website

Pre-Airport

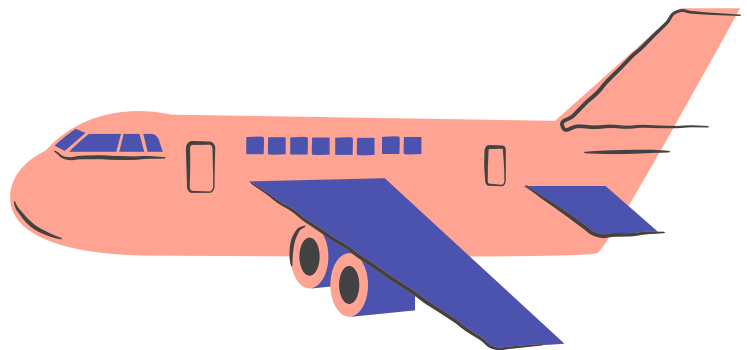
First, use this flowchart to determine where your wheelchair will be stored. That will determine the steps you need to take prior to traveling.



Wheelchair storage on the aircraft

If you're traveling with a **manual wheelchair** that's able to be folded or easily broken down, you may be able to store it in the aircraft cabin. All airplanes with 100 seats or more must have a wheelchair closet measuring at least **13 inches x 36 inches x 42 inches**, mandated by the Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA).⁸

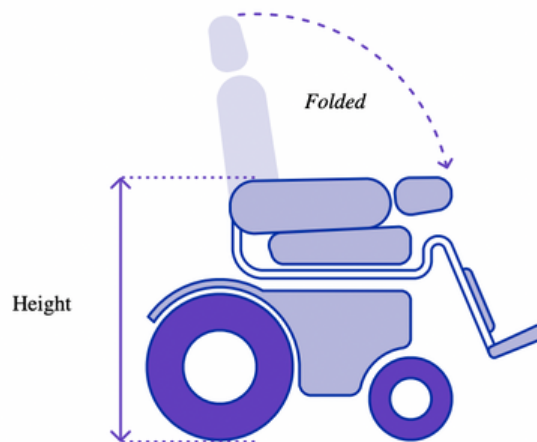
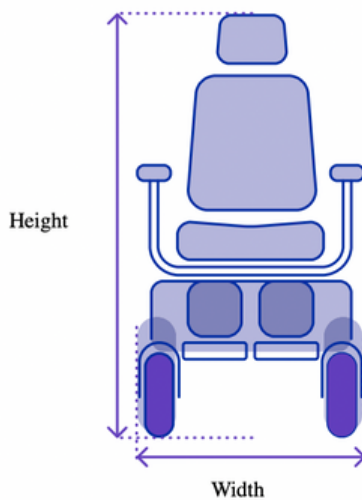
- **Wheelchairs take priority over other storage**, so speak up for your rights if the closet is already filled.¹⁴
- If you can bring it on the plane with you, it **DOES NOT** count towards the airline's baggage limit.¹⁵



If your wheelchair needs to be checked and stored as cargo ...

- It will be stored free of cost.
- Measure your wheelchair to make sure it will fit through the cargo door. Each aircraft has different dimensions.

Use [this link](#) or contact your airline for the specific dimensions.



<https://www.united.com>

- Parts may need to be **folded down or removed** in order to fit in the cargo hold. If your wheelchair does require some minor disassembly, airline staff are mandated to do this for you per ACAA regulation.⁸ However, you need to **provide the tools** (usually a small wrench to loosen bolts) and written instruction in case you're not there to help them.

Wheelchair handling forms:

- Most airlines have a **printable wheelchair handling form** which gives you the opportunity to share information on how best to handle your mobility device. This form should be attached to your wheelchair so the cargo handlers can see it and follow the instructions.

Airlines that have pre-existing forms:

1. Delta Airlines
2. United Airlines
3. JetBlue
4. Alaska Air
5. Southwest Airlines
6. Hawaiian Airlines

Airlines that don't have pre-existing forms

1. American Airlines

You should create your own document or use another airline's form

Click on each airline for the link to their forms!

Through the Airport

- You can **stay in your personal mobility device through the airport**, and gate check your device at the airline gate.
 - As stated in the ACAA, "Carriers shall provide for the checking and timely return of passengers' wheelchairs and other assistive devices as close as possible to the door of the aircraft, so that passengers may use their own equipment to the extent possible..."¹⁶
- Check in at your airline's check-in desk and **confirm the accommodations** you requested will be met.

Going through TSA security checkpoints ^{8,17}

- Inform the TSA officer of your ability to walk or stand independently before screening.
- If you're able to stand independently with your hands above your head for 5-7 seconds, you can go through the advanced imaging technology.
- If you're unable to stand independently, you will receive a **pat-down by a TSA officer** of the same gender. You may request a private screening at any time (may be accompanied by your companion). Your mobility device will also be inspected and tested for traces of explosives. Any removable pouches on your device will go through the X-ray machine.

You may print out and fill in this **TSA notification card** to make the process more efficient

- **Specific info for children:**

- For “infants or small children”, you may **carry them through** the metal detector, but if there is an alarm, the officer will have to conduct additional screening on you and the child.
- Children 12 years old and younger may leave on their shoes.
- They will not separate a parent or guardian from a child with or without a disability. Before screening begins, you should inform the TSA Officer of the child’s needs and any mobility limitations. You may offer suggestions on the best way to approach and screen your child, especially if it is necessary to touch him or her during screening.
- For more information and support, you can call the **TSA Cares** at 1-855-787-2227
 - They have Passenger Support Specialists (PSS) available at checkpoints to aid in the process.
- If you have the financial means to sign-up for TSA PreCheck or Global Entry, it will expedite your security screening process and **eliminate the physical pat-down**.
 - TSA PreCheck is \$78 for 5 years
 - Global Entry \$100 for 5 years
 - Children age 12 and under may accompany their parent/guardian without having to apply

Call 72 hours prior to traveling, or fill out the **“Request for TSA Cares Assistance”** online.

Boarding



Pre-boarding: ^{8,14,16}

- Under ACAA (14 CFR 382.93), you are allowed to **pre-board the airplane** before all other passengers, including first class passengers, elite-level passengers, members of the military, passengers with small children, etc.
- This regulation covers passengers that **"need additional time or assistance to board, stow accessibility equipment, or be seated."**
- **Instructions:** identify yourself at the gate check-in counter as someone who needs additional time to board

Getting on the plane:

- After your boarding pass is scanned (before all other passengers), you will head down the jet bridge to the airplane door for the **transfer** into the aisle chair.
 - Before doing this, **remove all removable parts** from your wheelchair! (see more in the wheelchair safety section)
- **Aisle chair** = a small wheelchair that's used to transport passengers from their personal wheelchairs to their airplane seat ⁸
- Communication is key! Advise the wheelchair assistants on how best to transfer you. They are required by federal law to be trained in **proper transfer techniques**. ⁸



Navigating the airplane

Once on the plane:

- The wheelchair assistant (or your companion) will wheel you down the aisle and transfer you into your assigned seat. If your seat has a **removable armrest**, the armrest will be removed to ease the transfer. Aircrafts with more than 30 passengers are required to have movable armrests equipped in at least half of the aisle seats.¹⁶

Using the lavatory: ⁸

- If your aircraft is equipped with an accessible toilet, you may use the **onboard aisle wheelchair** and help from companions or flight attendants to access the lavatory.
- Keep in mind: flight attendants are not able to assist with toilet transfers or any other personal care
- If your flight does have an **accessible bathroom**, confirm that there is an aisle wheelchair onboard before departure.

Deplaning

- It's recommended to stay seated in the airplane seat until it's been **confirmed** that your **personal wheelchair is ready at the jet bridge**. It would be more uncomfortable to sit waiting in the aisle wheelchair. If waiting longer than 20 minutes in the aisle wheelchair, there's a risk for pressure sores.¹⁸
- Therefore, wheelchair users are **typically last to deplane**. When ready, the wheelchair assistants will assist in transferring to the aisle chair, and then into your personal wheelchair.
- According to federal regulations, airlines must provide for the checking and **timely return** of passengers' wheelchairs which means that your mobility device should be among the first items retrieved from the baggage compartment.¹⁶

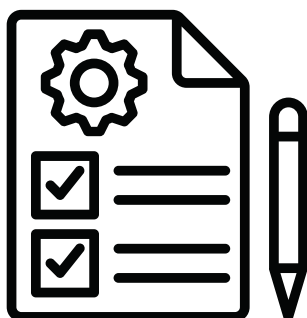


Wheelchair Safety

How to decrease the risk of damage

- 1 Keep the wheelchair with you as long as possible. For example, **check it at the gate** instead of the check in counter.
- 2 Store the wheelchair in the **aircraft cabin** if it's a manual wheelchair and is small enough to fit in the on-board wheelchair closet (13in x 36in x 42in).
- 3 Before booking, check to make sure the **wheelchair can fit** through your airline's specific **cargo door** (see page 13). Wheelchairs that can't fit upright in the cargo compartment can be loaded and stored on their side, but the risk for damage is significantly higher.

- 4 Before turning a wheelchair over to airport personnel, **take off any removable parts** such as the seat cushion, removable wheels, footrests, headrests and joysticks.^{8,19} Bring a bag to store these items in; they may be carried on the plane and do not count as baggage.²⁰ Use your seat cushion on the plane!
- 5 Wrap **protective cushioning material** around any parts that are unable to be removed that are susceptible to damage.¹⁹
- 6 Complete, laminate and attach a **wheelchair handling form** with any additional instructions on how to handle, disassemble, and operate the wheelchair. This will help the baggage handlers properly care for the wheelchair. See the Pre-Airport section for airline-specific links.



7 **Take pictures** of the wheelchair before handing it off for your own records. In the off chance that it does come back damaged, you have proof that it happened during the flight experience.

The fears and emotions surrounding wheelchair damage are **valid**. It's scary thinking about your way of mobility being taken away.

The percentage of wheelchairs damaged in July 2022 was 1.67%¹⁰

And, U.S. airlines are responsible for the repair/replacement and the accommodation of a loaner chair.



Violations

What happens if your rights have been violated?

When violations occur, passengers should first **report the violation to the airline** within 45 days. The U.S. Department of Transportation requires airlines to respond within 30 days.²¹



After receiving the airline's response, file a complaint with the DOT at [this link](#).

Most frequently violated accessibility rules:⁸

- **Preboarding:** people with disabilities should have the opportunity to preboard before anyone else
- **Returning checked mobility equipment:** wheelchairs should be the first items retrieved from the cargo compartment and be returned as close to the aircraft door as possible, NOT up in the terminal
- **Safety briefing:** before takeoff, a crew member should conduct an individual briefing of each person who needs assistance to exit during an emergency

What happens if your wheelchair is damaged?

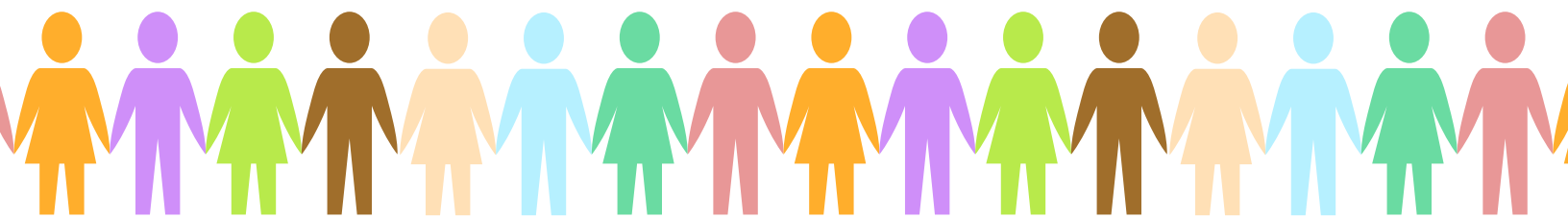
- 1 Document the evidence as soon as possible by taking photos of the damage.
- 2 Report it at your airline's baggage service office to a representative. If they can't help you, ask to speak to the Complaints Resolution Official (CRO). They should be able to help you file a report. This report should be filed immediately.



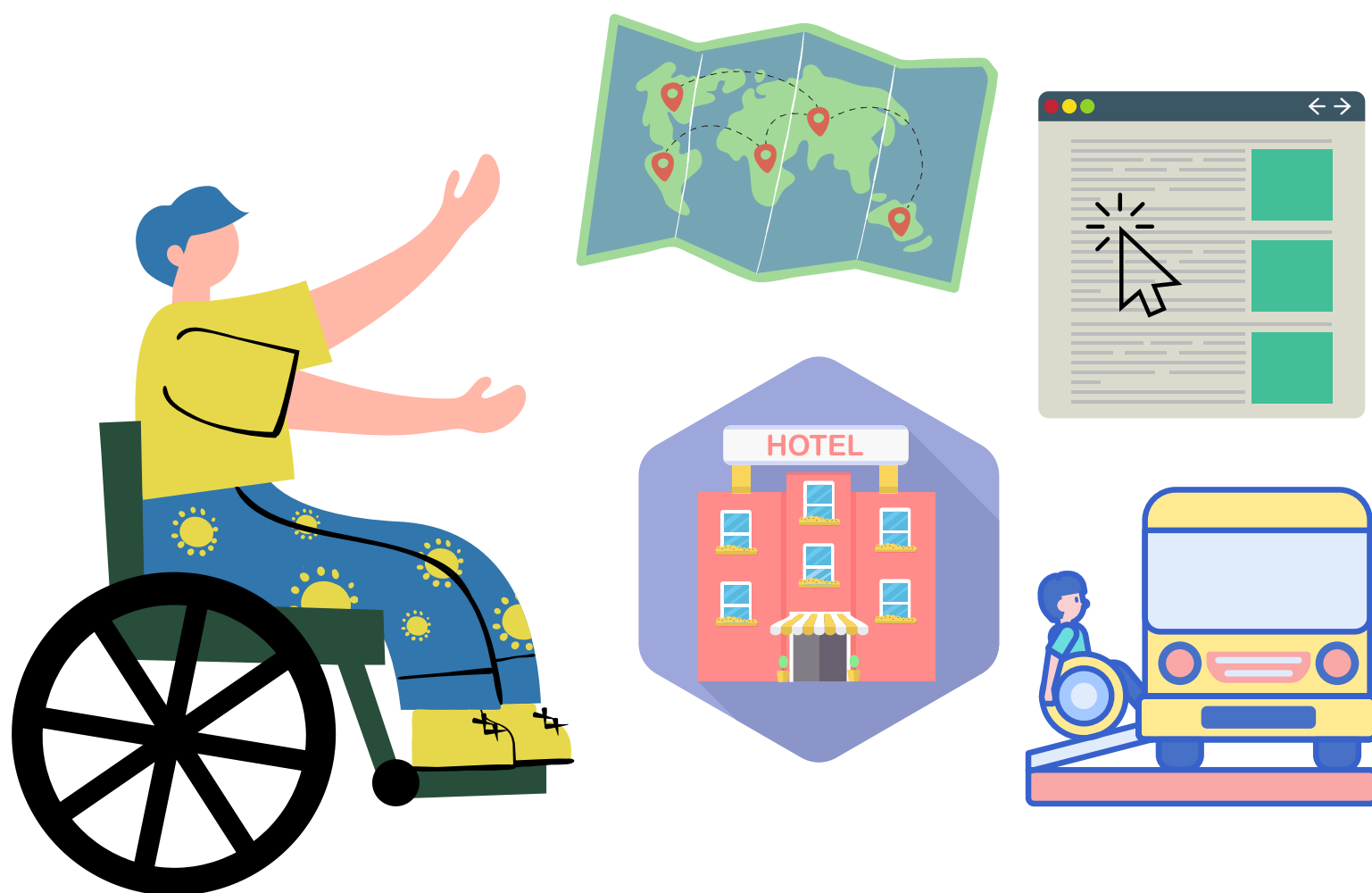
CROs are the airline's expert on disability-related issues in air travel. Each airline is required to have at least one on site or available by phone.

- 3 Send a formal, written complaint to the airline after you get back from your trip.
- 4 File a complaint with the DOT using the previously mentioned link

Note: On domestic flights, airlines must **fully compensate passengers for loss or damage to wheelchairs**



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES





*Click on each title
for their link!*

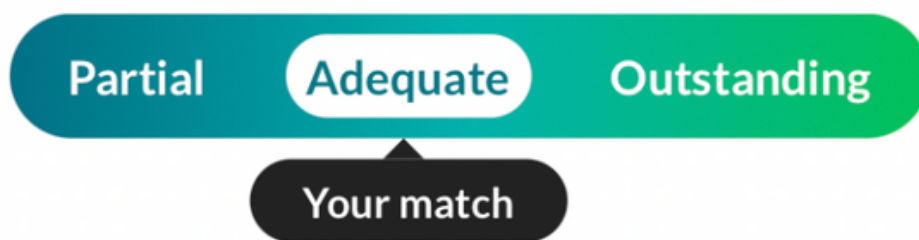
Accessiblego.com

- A community based forum where you can ask/answer questions about traveling
- Search for accessibility features and best rates for over 6,000 hotels in over 125 US cities to date
- Within 48 hours of booking, they convey your accessibility requirements to the hotel and alert you immediately if there's an issue.
- City specific accessibility travel guides with places to see, things to do, etc.

Wheel the World

- Find and book accessible places to stay, things to do and multi-day trips
- More than 160 destinations worldwide
- You can create a personalized profile with all of your accessibility needs which is compared to hotels' information to present you with a "personal accessibility match" for each hotel

Personal Accessibility Match [How it works](#)



WheelchairTravel.org

- An accessible travel blog with information about all things travel
- Wheelchair users' guide to: airline travel, hotels, traveling abroad, train travel
- Accessible travel guides to the world's most accessible cities including: Paris, Hong Kong, Dubai, and over 25 U.S. cities

Curb Free with Cory Lee

- An accessible travel blog sharing experiences as a wheelchair user
- Cory has traveled to all 7 continents and shares his experiences of each place he goes
- Some destinations include: Antarctica, Morocco, Costa Rica, Germany, Argentina and more!
- He also shares overall travel tips and interviews from other wheelchair user travelers

Accessible Travel Club

- A Facebook group with nearly 15,000 members
- Discussion-based platform to ask questions, share experiences and make connections

U.S. Hotline for Air Travelers with Disabilities

- The U.S. Department of Transportation has a toll-free hotline for disability-related air travel questions or problems
- **1-800-778-4838** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time, Monday through Friday except federal holidays

European Union Accessibility

- Traveling into the EU? Click this link for a summary of their air travel accessibility requirements
- Similar to the ACAA in the U.S.

The Perfect Lift

- A lightweight and portable lift that allows for easier, more comfortable transfers
- Great for traveling and recreational activities (it's water resistant!)
- A good option if you're uncomfortable with airline wheelchair attendants personally handling your body
- Recommended by a couple of wheelchair user travel blogs

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