

A guide to travelling by plane

For people with autism

Travelling by plane can be very exciting for some, but very stressful for others. This information sheet is designed to help you prepare for your trip, from planning your journey to arriving at your destination.

Also included in this guide are links to our video and download guides for people with autism and their travelling companions using Birmingham Airport. The video is a 12 minute 'walkthrough' guide from arriving at the airport through to departure on the plane. The two downloads are an assistance guide for parents and carers and a visual 'easy-read' and activity guide for children with autism. These are available on the Special assistance page of the **Birmingham Airport website** and other airports may have similar assistance guides available.

Our guides and video are accessible through our website here:

<https://www.autismwestmidlands.org.uk/online-resources/birmingham-airport/>



Tips to help you plan your journey and get ready to leave

- Start planning your trip to the airport well in advance. How are you getting to the airport?

Mode of Transport	Things to Consider
Car	You will need to plan where you will leave your car while you are away. Some airports have information on long-stay parking on their website.
Train	You will need to check what time the trains are to the airport and you may need to book a ticket.
Bus	You will need to check which busses run to the airport and you may need to book a ticket.
Taxi	It may cost you considerably more than other modes of transport and you may need to book in advance.
A lift from a friend or a family member	Ensure your friend or family member knows what time you need to be at the airport and that you ask them in advance.

- Find out what time you need to arrive at the airport. For shorter flights (UK and EU), this is usually 2 hours before, for international flights, 3 hours before the departure of your flight.
- Pack a carry-on bag with a few things to help you relax in the airport and on the plane. You might need some earplugs or ear defenders, sunglasses, a neck pillow and an eye mask. Bring books (or a kindle), music, iPad, puzzle books, or whatever else you use to pass the time. Make sure your electronic devices are charged.
- Check that you have all of your travel documents ready well before you travel: ticket, passport (is your passport valid?), visa (if needed), travel insurance (if wanted).
- There are restrictions on how much liquid you can take in your carry-on bag. Containers must not be bigger than 100ml and should be placed in a small clear plastic bag (measuring approximately 20cmx20cm). If you need to take liquids in your carry-on bag, make sure you have packed them correctly before leaving for the airport. Visit <https://www.gov.uk/hand-luggage-restrictions> for more information.
- If you are checking in luggage, label it with something distinctive like a ribbon or a large sticker. This is so that when you are collecting your luggage at your destination airport, you can easily recognise it.
- Let the airport know if you have any specific support needs. You can do this when you are booking your tickets, or you can call the airport to let them know. You may be able to visit the airport before your trip. Some airports also have guides for people with additional needs, which you might find useful.

Tips to help you navigate the airport

- Identify someone who can help you if you need assistance. Most airports will have information points and help points (these may be labelled with an 'i' or 'special assistance') and staff wearing fluorescent vests.
- There will be a number of times when you will need to queue, for example at checkin, at security and before boarding. If you have trouble with queueing, let a member of staff know so that they can assist you.

Check-in

- The first thing you will need to do after you arrive at the airport is check in. If you have checked in online before arriving at the airport then you can skip this step. If you have checked in online but need to drop off your luggage, you can use the check-in desks or, in some cases, the automatic bag drop.

- There will be a number of check-in desks in the entrance hall. Your check-in desk number will be displayed on large screens throughout the airport. If you need help finding your check-in desk, ask a member of staff.
- There may be a queue of people waiting to check in at the check-in desk. Wait in line until you reach the front. Here you may be asked some security questions which may include:

Have you packed your baggage yourself?

Has anyone asked you to carry anything on board for them?

Have you left your bags unattended at any time?

- You will also be asked if you would like to check in any bags. These will be bags that are too large to carry on to the aircraft. The member of staff behind the desk can advise whether or not your bag needs to be checked in. Bags that you check in will be taken to the aircraft you are travelling on using a series of conveyor belts. You will be able to retrieve your checked in bags at the airport you are flying to.
- The member of staff behind the desk may also ask to see your passport, ticket and/ or booking confirmation.
- Once all of these steps are completed you will be handed your boarding pass. Keep this safe as you will need this when passing through security and when boarding the plane.

Security

- Once you have checked in and you have your boarding pass, find out which gate you will be using by checking the large screens and make your way in that direction. You will need to pass through security to get to your gate. If you are unsure of where to go ask a member of staff.
- There will be signs at security showing you any items that are forbidden in your hand luggage. If you have any of these items in your hand luggage please dispose of them in the bins provided or hand them to a member of staff.

- At security there may be a long queue. If you struggle with queuing, let a member of staff know so that they can assist you. When you get to the front of the queue please follow the instructions given to you by the airport staff. This may include putting your possessions (for example keys, wallet, mobile phone, plastic bag containing liquids etc.) into the plastic trays provided. These possessions will be x-rayed so that the airport staff can check that you do not have any forbidden items in your hand luggage. Sometimes airport staff may need to check the items in your hand luggage more thoroughly (for example, electronic devices).
- A member of staff will prompt you to walk through a metal detector. Follow staff instructions. For example:
 - They may ask you to remove your shoes, belt and jacket
 - They may ask you to take all of the electronic devices out of your bag
 - They may ask to search you by patting you down.
- Sometimes, staff will have to pat you down to check whether you have any forbidden items.
- If you feel uncomfortable about any of this, it may be best to tell them about your autism, and any fears you may have.

Departures lounge

- When you enter the departures lounge, check again which gate your aircraft is departing from. The gate is the area where you will board your plane. This will be displayed on a large screen in the departures lounge. Look for your flight listed on the screen. When the words 'boarding' or 'go to gate' are showing make your way to the gate.
- You usually have to walk through the 'Duty Free' section to get to your gate. There may be strong smells and lots of people. If you think this may cause you a problem, you can use ear defenders, sunglasses, nose pinches and any other items which may help with the sensory input. You can also let a member of staff know.
- At the gate, airport staff will prompt you when it is time to get on the plane. There may be a queue of people also waiting to get on. When you get to the front of the queue the airport staff will ask to see your boarding pass and passport. They will then direct you to get on to the plane.
- If you are uncomfortable with queueing, let a member of staff know and ask if you can board first or last.

Tips to help you on the plane

Boarding the plane

- As you enter the plane, look for your seat. Seats are numbered, so look for the seat number which matches the number on your boarding pass. A member of the cabin crew may direct you to your seat.
- When you get to your seat, you can either store your hand luggage in the overhead compartment or under the seat in front of you if it is small enough. If you are sitting by an emergency exit, or in the first row, you will have to store your hand luggage in the overhead compartment.
- If you are storing your luggage in the overhead compartment, take out things that you may need during take-off (books, a tangle toy, a notepad, puzzle books, a pen, earphones, sweets) before you sit down. You can store these in the pocket in the seat in front of you (if there is one). Alternatively, you can have these pre-packed in a smaller bag which you can place under the seat in front of you.
- Do not put your essential flight items in the overhead luggage compartment because you may not be able to get to them easily when the plane has taken off.

Take-off and landing

- Once you are seated and before the plane takes off the cabin crew will go over safety instructions. It is very important that you remain quiet in this time and listen carefully.
- You will be asked by the cabin crew to turn off all electronic equipment (or switch them to flight mode) during take-off and landing. They will inform you when it is safe to turn these items back on.
- During take-off and landings, the engines will get loud. If you are sensitive to sounds you may want to use a pair of noise-muting headphones or earplugs. Check with the cabin crew if this is ok as they may have safety rules against using headphones or earplugs during take-off. In this case, you can plug your ears with your fingers.
- To make take-off and landing more fun you could count down from 10 down to 1, then say "BLAST OFF" as the plane starts to lift from the ground or land!

Air turbulence and cabin pressure

- Air turbulence is most commonly caused when a plane flies through a cloudless region where there might be updrafts or downdrafts of air (this is called Clear Air Turbulence). This can cause the aircraft to move up or down more than usual. Even the most frequent of fliers may start to feel anxious when turbulence occurs. If you are feeling anxious you can use distractions. You might want to read a book, listen to music or watch a film.
- Cabin pressure varies throughout the flight (especially during take-off and landing). This means that sometimes pressure can build up in your ears. To relieve this pressure you can try swallowing water, yawning, chewing gum, sucking on a hard-boiled sweet, or you may want to use a sensory chew toy.

General tips to reduce anxiety when flying

- Avoid caffeine products. Products containing caffeine such as tea, coffee and even some medications can mean that nervous travellers can become more anxious.
- Focus on the destination, rather than the journey. Finding ways of looking forward to the benefits of the break can prevent anxiety build up.
- Try some breathing exercises to keep yourself calm during your flight.

Here is an example of a breathing exercise:

Breathe deeply and hold your breath for 5 seconds.

Breathe out very slowly, for another 5 seconds.

Repeat this for 3 to 5 minutes.

Tips to help you when you arrive at your destination

The order of the steps below may vary depending on the airport

- When the plane lands the cabin crew will instruct you on when you can unfasten your seatbelts, stand up and collect your hand luggage and any personal belongings that you have with you.
- When you exit the plane you may have to take a bus to the airport terminal, or walk there. If you have to pick up luggage, follow the signs to the baggage claim area.
- When you arrive at the baggage claim area there will either be signs or a screen which will tell you where you can collect your luggage. Make your way over to the correct collection point and wait until you see your bag, take your bag and follow the signs to the exit.

- If you can't find your bag, ask a member of staff to help you.
- Depending on where you are travelling to, you may have to pass through a border force check. Sometimes you will be given landing cards on the plane. You must fill in these in and present them to airport staff when asked.
- Before you leave the airport you may also have to go through customs. Customs is the place at the airport where officials check incoming goods, travellers, or luggage so that they can make sure the country's import and export laws are followed. If the airport staff want to check your luggage as you pass through customs please follow their instructions.

Have a lovely trip!