

Preparing to Travel with a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

3 Things to know before you close your suitcase

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Special challenges accompany travel with a child on the Autism Spectrum. Advice follows on how to identify and cope with them:

1. "...put on your own oxygen mask first and then attend to your child (or husband)." Take care of your needs first or you won't be able to help your child. For both you and your child, travel with a pre-packaged first-aid kit or select from items in the Checklist
2. With so much time dedicated to the special needs of the ASD child, it is easy to forget their routine travel medical needs. If a foreign trip is to other than Western Europe, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Australia or New Zealand take your child to a physician a month in advance.

An essential question on a trip can be whether urgent or emergent medical care is needed. Children with ASD are as likely to get other illness requiring immediate medical attention such as appendicitis. The following is a partial list of symptoms requiring urgent medical attention. Of course, when in doubt one should see a doctor:

- a. Temperature over 101 or remains over 100 after Tylenol/Ibuprofen is given
 - b. Unconsciousness with or without seizure activity (involuntary jerking motions)
 - c. Severe abdominal pain manifested by doubling over and clutching one's belly
 - d. Spurting/voluminous/rapidly bandage soaking bleeding
 - e. Rapid change in vision
 - f. New onset dizziness
 - g. More than 2-3 episodes of diarrhea, vomiting or both in a day.
 - h. Significant head trauma with or without "the worst headache of my life"
 - i. Persistent (1-2 days) sore throat or ear pain, especially before flying
3. Traveling with children who are at risk from injuries during a "meltdown" and from the potential horrors of wandering off. Preventive medicine strategies include:
 - a. Teach your child with ASD about the trip in as many ways as you can start a couple weeks beforehand. For instance, a practice trip to the local airport may help. See if you can go through security to familiarize your child. Show him pictures of not only the destination but also the inside of a plane.

- b. Practice waiting (a skill key to modern travel) with a favorite toy as a reward after a few minutes. Then gradually increase the time. (Chantal Sicile-Kira, sheknows.com)
- c. For safety, carry a recent photo of your child. Pin an information card your up-to-date contact information to the back of his shirt or have him wear a Medic Alert type of bracelet. Include the words, “non-verbal”. Consider buying commercial electronic locators.
- d. Inform the airlines and hotels of your special needs. See if priority seating, bulkhead seats and hotel rooms at the end of the hall are available.
- e. Unfortunately, other travelers and the airline may not be prepared for or even sympathetic to someone with ASD. Handing out a wallet card briefly explaining ASD, helps with fellow travelers. (Rebecca Kaplan, USA Today)
- f. Vacation travel should be partially geared to the interests of the child. Don’t over schedule the day as many children require some down time. Some places are known to accommodate special needs children such as Disney World. (Amy Lennard Goehner, TIME)

Remember, for the sake of your child, take care of yourself first. Familiarity and preparation is the friend of the ASD child.