

Successfully Flying (One Way) While Using a Vent

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I have used mechanical ventilation for sleep and rest since 1952 and a BiPAP machine since 1994. Long periods at altitudes above 5,000 feet have always been difficult, and long ago I gave up vacations in the Rockies. This problem has increased as I age, and I have come to dread airline travel with flights that last for more than four hours, because a good deal of that time will be in air pressurized at the equivalent of between 8,000 and 10,000 feet.

I recently needed to fly from Washington, DC, to San Francisco and back. Some people in my circumstances apparently use oxygen, but I have been advised by pulmonologists several times that using my BiPAP would be a better solution, because what I need is an easier way to take deeper breaths during flight, rather than pure oxygen.

Initially, I thought the best alternative would be a compact ventilator with its own internal, long-life battery, such as the Puritan Bennett 540™. So I attempted to rent one. Unfortunately, the machine had not been approved for flying by mid-March, when I needed to make a decision. (I still think this is the best solution for me.)

The alternative was to use my bilevel on DC power, with a power connection supplied by United Airlines. The plane was a Boeing 777, and I was booked in the Economy Plus section. Through reservations, I connected with their aeromedical desk and found that my BiPAP was on their approved list. The only information they asked for was the model number.

In due course, United Airlines approved my request to use my BiPAP during flight and said that the ground crew would run a power cord directly to my seat. All I needed to supply was the proper connector – an automobile cigarette lighter connector. In this case, it was the “DC Power Adapter Kit” made by Philips Respironics, purchased for \$200 through my supplier.

On the way to San Francisco, everything worked very smoothly. The power cord was available when I boarded the plane, and I used my BiPAP for the middle three hours of the more than five-hour flight. The Economy Plus seats on the wide-body plane were comfortable, and I arrived rested.

The only glitch was that the flight crew didn't know what the power cord was for, and the installation looked a little formidable. It included what looked like a full-sized car battery on the floor beside my seat, taped firmly to the wall. My attendant and I were obviously as apprehensive about this as was the flight crew. But as soon as things were explained, and we knew the set-up worked, everyone relaxed.

Coming back from San Francisco was a different matter. The first leg was from San Francisco to Chicago on a 757. As it turned out, the crew couldn't run a power connection to the economy section on the smaller plane, and they couldn't upgrade me to first class, because the plane was full. It didn't matter much because the flying time to Chicago was only three hours and 15 minutes.

The moral is that having your own power supply built into a compact ventilator definitely has the advantage of not requiring special services from the airline, which can be a hassle even with the best preparation and the best intentions of everyone. Another plus is that you can travel on every kind of aircraft in any section of the aircraft. ▲