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COPD patients' pre-flight check: A narrative review

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Abstract

For most of the people with stable and well-controlled chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), air travel is safe and comfortable, but the flight environment may pose clinical challenges. This narrative review aims to update the requirements for allowance to fly of people with COPD without chronic respiratory failure. A literature review was performed on platforms: Pubmed, Scopus and Ovid, for citations in English from 2000 to 2021. The following key words were used: COPD AND: air-travel, in-flight hypoxemia, fitness to air travel. Official regulatory documents and guidelines were also examined. Current air travel statements recommend supplemental oxygen when in flight arterial oxygen tension (PaO₂) is expected to fall below 6.6 or 7.3 kPa. Several lung function variables, prediction equations and algorithms have been proposed to estimate in-flight PaO₂, the need for in-flight supplemental oxygen, and to select individuals needing more advanced pre-flight testing, such as the hypoxia-altitude simulation test. Exercise induced desaturation and aerobic capacity correlate significantly with in-flight PaO₂. COPD patients with late intensification of disease, new changes in medications, recent acute exacerbation/ hospitalization or anticipated emotional and physical stress during the proposed air-travel should be carefully evaluated by the caring family or specialist physician.

Key words: COPD, air travelling, fit to travel, In-flight hypoxemia, narrative review.

“Man must rise above the Earth—to the top of the atmosphere and beyond—for only thus will he fully understand the world in which he lives”.

Socrates, ‘Plato’s Dialogue

Introduction

Air travel is generally safe, but the flight environment poses unique physiologic challenges that may trigger adverse outcomes. Before the COVID19 pandemic four and half billion passengers flew in 2019 [1]. Given the increase in aged and potentially vulnerable passengers, there are concerns about unrealistic expectations that airlines accept passenger anyone who wishes to fly, independently of their health status [2].

The in-flight medical emergency (IME: a medical occurrence requiring the assistance of the cabin crew) may result from exacerbations of a chronic disease or be an acute event in a previously healthy individual [3]. It has been estimated that 260 to 1,420 IMEs occur daily worldwide [4]. In a study conducted by Martin-Gill et al, on 49,100 IMEs, it was found that syncope or near syncope was the most common (32.7%) followed by gastrointestinal (14.8%), respiratory (10.1%) and cardiovascular (7.0%) symptoms, while cardiac arrest was rare(0.2%) [4]. In-flight respiratory distress was experienced in 18% of individuals with pre-existing respiratory problems, the third most common reason for medical diversion, after cardiac and neurological conditions [5].

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is the most common diagnosis (39%) amongst individuals with chronic respiratory diseases, referred for pre-flight assessment [5]. For most of the people with stable and well-controlled COPD, air travel is safe and comfortable [6] and they cannot be denied access based on their diagnosis alone. However, these individuals may show various clinical and physiological conditions which might question their safety and comfort during an air travel.

This narrative review aims to update the requirements for people suffering from COPD, to travel by air. It is limited to stable and well controlled individuals, without chronic respiratory failure.

Literature Research

A comprehensive literature review was performed on electronic platforms: Pubmed, Scopus and Ovid, for publications in English, from 2000 to 2021. The following key words, in pairs, were used: COPD AND: air travel, in-flight hypoxemia, fitness to air travel respectively. The results were cumulated to get the final list o citations. Additionally, the retrieved articles were tracked down looking for other relevant studies or reviews (**Figure 1**). In addition, the sources of official regulatory documents and guidelines were explored for extracting the relevant material on technical and legal issues [2,7-18]. As a narrative review, no quality evaluation was performed.

Physiology of air flight

Altitude is the distance above sea level and is defined as [18]:

- High (4,921 – 11,483 feet/1,500-3,500 meters)

- Very high (11,483 - 18,045 feet/3,500-5,500 meters)
- Extremely high (> 18,045 feet/>5,500 meters)

In aircraft cabin environment, the passengers may eventually face lower air pressure, humidity, and sub-optimal air quality [19]. Increasing altitude indeed may result in decreasing inspired oxygen partial pressure (PiO_2), arterial oxygen tension (PaO_2), and saturation (SaO_2). The difference between PiO_2 and PaO_2 depends also on time of exposure (residents, acclimatization vs acute vs subacute exposure), and it reduces at high altitude because of increased minute ventilation (VE), SaO_2 is maintained while awake until over 9,843 feet (3,000 meters) of real pressure altitude [20,21]. Atmospheric pressure estimated PiO_2 and equivalent inspiratory oxygen fraction (FiO_2) at sea level according to altitude is shown in **Table 1**.

The typical “cruising altitude” – that is, the usual highest altitude reached during commercial flights and sustained between take-off and landing – is around 38,000 feet (11,582 meters). In cabins the Environmental Control System maintains the air pressure, expressed as a “pressure altitude equivalent” versus real pressure altitude, defined as the distance above sea level at which the atmosphere exerts the same pressure as the actual pressure in the aircraft cabin [16]. The regulatory agencies require that an aircraft should be capable of maintaining a minimal cabin pressure equivalent to an altitude of 8,000 feet (2,438 meters) under normal operating conditions [13]. The baseline threshold of altitude-induced hypoxemia is generally considered to be 3,300 feet (1,006 meters); the choice of maintaining a pressure altitude equivalent of 8,000 feet (2,438 meters) in the cabin is because up to that level, SaO_2 normally remains above 90% in average healthy individual [7]. Therefore, it would be highly advisable for those with COPD, to limit their in-flight movements, to minimise the risk of desaturation.

Physiology of COPD

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease leads to symptoms and functional limitations with airflow obstruction, increased load on breathing and abnormalities in gas exchange [6]. As the aircraft environment is designed for people without oxygenation problems, the cabin pressure allowing acceptable oxygenation in individuals with normal lung function may be not enough for people with COPD [22]. A healthy adult, at altitude of 8,000 feet (2,438 meters), will desaturate to approximately 92 - 93%, whereas an individual with COPD, may reach approximately 82% and might experience hypoxic symptoms [23]. In individuals with COPD,

the ability to increase VE in response to hypoxia is limited and the presence of an alteration in perfusion/ventilation ratio makes it often difficult for them to maintain adequate oxygenation during the flight. As a result, these individuals may have a higher risk for significant hypoxemia during air travel [24]. The effects of high altitude on individuals with COPD were studied during a commercial flight with a mean cabin pressure equivalent to an altitude of 6,000 feet (1,829 meters) [25]. The subjects were tested both when seated and when walking along the aisle. In the pre-flight evaluation all of them had been found fit for air travel without supplemental oxygen. The mean pre-flight pulse oxymetry (SpO₂) at sea level fell from 96% to 94% after one hour of flight at cruising altitude, while seated. However, it decreased significantly to 87% when walking [25-26]. Therefore, it would be advisable that airflight's clients with COPD should remain seated while flying to prevent hypoxia.

Oxygenation

The blood oxygenation and by extension, the risk of tissue hypoxia is most commonly monitored non-invasively by SpO₂, despite the limitations of this approach. More accurate assessments can be obtained by arterial blood gas analysis (ABG). For adequate tissue oxygenation, first the blood must contain normal haemoglobin (Hb) concentration which should be >95 % saturated with oxygen in arterial blood [27], the second element necessitating attention being Hb concentration, which must be enough to carry the oxygen to tissues.

Pre-flight screening

Air travelling for most of the people with stable and well-controlled COPD is a safe activity. However, for those with more advanced and unstable disease, the guidelines of Aerospace Medical Association [17], American Thoracic Society [15] and British Thoracic Society [14] suggest that they should undergo a clinical and functional evaluation for "Fit to Fly", before the planned departure. The examining physician needs a detailed history examination and physical examination to critically evaluate health status of the intending traveler. Any previous flying history should be explored, so that relevant events during the flight and after the travel could be critically analyzed. The notable issues would be to ascertain the nature and extent of

1. New co-morbidities
2. Intensification of pre-existing medical conditions
3. Changes in medications

4. Acute exacerbation/ hospitalization.

5. Anticipated emotional and physical stress during the proposed air travel

Of note, each case, for further work up, should be evaluated on its peculiarities and the custom of “ One-Size-Fits-All” should not be practised. The advanced COPD is a systemic disease with pulmonary and extra-pulmonary manifestations. Which of the following commonly employed tests, for pre-flight screening , needs to be done cannot be generalized. The decision should be individualized. Ideally, individuals with COPD especially those with more advanced and unstable disease should undergo an evaluation before a planned flight [28] to rule out any contraindication to travel before planning the trip [29]. It is of utmost importance, for the attending physician (GP/Primary Care Physician/Specialist) to conduct detailed history and physical examination to evaluate the health status of the intending traveller. If there is a history of travel problems in previous air trips, the details of the events should be explored. Moreover, it is necessary to check the COPD status with particular attention on recent exacerbation and therapy correct use. Furthermore, it is important to perform several test to identify potential onset of respiratory problems during the flight, therefore, in the following paragraphs all the necessary and available tests in clinical practice will be detailed.

Hypoxia Altitude Simulation Test (HAST)

Several lung function variables, prediction equations and algorithms have been proposed to estimate in-flight PaO₂, the need for in-flight supplemental oxygen, and to select individuals needing more advanced pre-flight testing, such as the hypoxia-altitude simulation test (HAST) [14,30,31,32]. Prediction equations, sea level PaO₂ and spirometer values alone have proven not to be reliable tool for estimating the risk of severe in-flight hypoxemia [14,25,30,31].

The results of HAST are reasonably comparable with conditions at commercial flight cruising altitudes and this still test is considered as the “clinical gold standard” to identify the need for supplemental in-flight oxygen [30-33]. However, HAST is time consuming and not widely available, therefore it is really important to minimize its costs by correctly screening individuals needing it. Under ECG and SpO₂ monitoring, the intending traveller is required to breathe a mixture of 15% oxygen and 85% nitrogen, from a Douglas bag, through a mouthpiece or a facial mask, connected to a two-way valve [34]. Arterial blood gases are sampled pre and post-test [35]. The interpretation of the test is that an individual needs in-flight oxygen if PaO₂ falls below 6.6 Kpa (50 mmHg) after the test or if SpO₂ falls below 85% [29-36].

Pulse oximetry

The pulse oximeter is a non-invasive, readily available, simple to use and inexpensive device. In individuals with COPD, breathing room air at sea level, and normoxemic at rest, the results may be interpreted as follows:

- SpO₂ >95% - To be accepted as fit to fly, without further work up. No need of in-flight supplemental oxygen [29].
 - Although a SpO₂ ≥ 92% indicates that hypoxemia may be not present [37-38], values between 92% and 95% are considered as an alert and further evaluations such as ABG, HAST should be performed, particularly if there is a history of hypoxic event in a previous air trip [14].
 - SpO₂ < 92% - Needed prescription for in-flight supplemental oxygen, without further work up [37,38].

Peripheral pulse oxygenation of about 90% correspond to a PaO₂ of approximately 60 mmHg. Current air travel statements recommend supplemental oxygen when PaO₂ is expected to fall below 6.6 or 7.3 kPa (50 or 55 mmHg) [14,39].

Exercise Test

It has been shown that both exercises induced desaturation [26,34,40] and aerobic capacity [24,25] correlate significantly with in-flight PaO₂. The 6-minute walk test (6MWT) is a simple and practical field test, not requiring any sophisticated equipment [41]. An algorithm has been proposed [36] using a combination of SpO₂ at rest and at sea level (baseline) and exercise induced desaturation during 6MWT. Categories for baseline SpO₂ were > 95%, 92-95% and <92%, the cut-off value for SpO₂ during 6MWT was calculated as 84%.

- Individuals with baseline SpO₂ >95% combined with SpO₂ during 6MWT ≥ 84% may travel by air without further assessment.
- In-flight supplemental oxygen is recommended if baseline SpO₂ 92-95% combined with SpO₂ during 6MWT <84% or if baseline SpO₂ <92%.
- Otherwise, HAST should be performed.

The UK Flight Outcomes Study has shown that, even in specialist centres, only 10% of patients undergo a walk test as part of a fitness to fly assessment [5]. The British Thoracic Society has,

therefore, removed the earlier reference to walk tests from its recommendations [14]. Stroller has removed ABG, from the list of required tests [37].

Lung Function

The most widely available tool to quantify the severity of COPD is lung function. Some authors have found that the forced expiratory volume at 1 second (FEV₁) as an additional parameter might improve predictive yield for estimating in-flight PaO₂ [42]. It has been reported that individuals with COPD and reduced carbon monoxide diffusion capacity (DLCO) are likely to experience the greatest altitude associated desaturations [43]. Another study concluded that vital capacity and SaO₂ at rest and after exercise could predict hypoxemia during HAST in individuals with respiratory diseases (including COPD) [44]. It is important to remind that in individuals with COPD exertional dyspnoea is not correlated with severity of airway obstruction [45].

A tentative flow chart of simple pre-flight evaluations of fitness to fly is described in **Figure 2**.

Prescription of in-flight supplemental oxygen

The answer to the straightforward question, in MEDIF (Medical Information for Fitness to Travel or Special Assistance) [7], *“Does the patient need supplementary oxygen in-flight?”* needs details: self -arranged or carrier -supplied, which phase (s) of flight, continuous or pulse flow, which flow rate?

- If the whole trip involves multiple airlines, all of them must be contacted because policies and procedures may differ.
- The airline(s) should be notified If the passenger prefers to use his/her own Portable Oxygen Concentrator (POC), and allowance must be obtained in advance.

Official Regulatory Documents and Guidelines

The airlines have the right to refuse passengers, unfit to fly for medical reasons [46]. However, the fitness for air travel has become a growing issue [47]. Fit to fly? Whose decision is final? the attending physician or the airline?

IATA's Regulations regarding Medical Clearance

The IATA's Medical Manual has made it clear that the medical clearance (permission to board the plane) is entire discretion of the carrier airline (which has the right to impose conditions of carriage). The role of personal doctor is just advisory, limiting to filling the MEDIF which has two parts:

Part A (Information Sheet for Passengers Requiring Special Assistance, to be completed by the passenger or his/her representative) and Part B (Information Sheet for Passengers requiring medical clearance, to be completed by the treating physician). In addition to the complete physical examination, in the present scenario (stable COPD, non-hypoxemic at rest and at sea level), the attending physician must follow the protocol designed by the airlines, for chronic pulmonary conditions. It is of note that even after giving green signal to fly, the airline requires to be notified immediately of any change in health status or requirements of the intending traveller **PRIOR** to travel. Furthermore, the intending traveller whose condition has deteriorated later on or has not been accurately described in the MEDIF may be refused boarding in line with flight safety considerations [7].

Official Regulations Regarding Disabilities

Although the vast majority of potential air travellers are people who either are healthy or have no reason to think they are not, the Fifth Report of House of Lords Science and Technology Committee entitled "Air Travel and Health" [2] emphasizes the importance of fitness to fly and the need for intending travellers to satisfy themselves that they are generally fit to fly - not only for their own health but also for that of others. [2]. The European Union Parliament [8] and The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of the United States, enforced through The Department of Transportation [9] clearly state that airlines cannot discriminate against passengers because of their disability. However, the concerns of operating carriers have legal issues which need to be given adequate consideration. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease may be associated with comorbidities and disabilities which might question safety and comfort during flight.

Official Regulations regarding availability and usage of In-flight Oxygen

Delivery of supplemental oxygen, on board, is a complex issue. Airlines are not required to provide oxygen service, and many do not [11]. If they do, they have their own policies with specific price structure. Stroller's suggestion to the intending travellers to "shop around" for an appropriate airline is a very well-rewarding advice [37].

The airlines usually do not allow oxygen during taxing, take-off and landing. If oxygen is required during the whole flight, prior approval is necessary. Some airlines have the policy not to supply in-flight oxygen if the flight time is within six hours. Moreover, the airlines do not take the responsibility of managing oxygen supplementation during stopovers. Separate arrangements need to be made, in advance, by the traveller, if oxygen is required in transit or if the journey involves different airlines [7]. With the background knowledge of the in-flight oxygen delivery system, the attending physician should advise what would best suit the traveller.

According to FAA, the carriage of passenger's own oxygen containers (containing liquid or compressed gas), on board is banned [11]. The Final Rule titled, "*Oxygen and portable oxygen concentrators for medical use by passengers*", published by the FAA and the Department of Transportation, allows passengers to use portable oxygen concentrator (POC) if it satisfies certain acceptance criteria and bears a label indicating conformance with the acceptance criteria [10]. However, some airlines disallow carrying personal POC on board and require the passengers to purchase oxygen from them [48-49].

Although in-seat electrical power is available, some airlines refuse this facility to the needy passengers [EFA]. The FAA advises that the POC users should never rely upon available onboard aircraft electrical power during a flight and bring their battery operated POCs which must have at least 1.5 times as much battery life as the duration of the flight, including a contingency supply for an anticipated delays [50].

The POC batteries may be rechargeable during layovers; but the access to electric outlets is not always guaranteed. It is of note that the passenger operating a POC may be not permitted to occupy an exit seat in the airplane [12], to avoid impending emergency egress [51]. Carrier-Supplied portable oxygen bottles (POB) are reliable, officially approved, option but the passenger has to pay for that. The payment structure depends on the airline and the segment(s) of the trip.

Clinical Practice Points

Since being non hypoxemic at rest and at sea level does not guarantee that during the air travel, the individual with COPD declared fit to travel without any supplemental oxygen will remain symptom free, he/she should be advised to carry on board a Pocket Pulse Oximeter, as a convenient and reliable self-monitoring device. The safe threshold for oxygenation is to keep $SpO_2 \geq 85\%$ during the flight. If symptoms appear, the crew should be notified. The immediate response will be to start oxygen, through the POBs at the rate of 2-4 L/ minute under SpO_2 monitoring to reverse the hypoxemia [52].

Should it not be the case, the crew would take prompt action, according to IATA's Airline Medical Event Response Programs [7], making announcement "*is there any doctor on board?*", contacting the earth station for advice from ground-based support companies [53].

To optimize health outcomes, communication must take place between the traveller, family physician, and airline carrier when there is any doubt about fitness for air travel. Travelers should carry current medications in their original containers and a list of their medical conditions and allergies; they should adjust timing of medications as needed based on time zone changes. Trapped gases that expand at high altitude can cause problems for travellers with recent surgery; casting; ear, nose, and throat issues; or dental issues. Insulin requirements may change based on duration and direction of travel. Travelers can minimize risk for deep venous thrombosis by adequately hydrating, avoiding alcohol, and performing seated isometric exercises. Wearing compression stockings can prevent asymptomatic deep venous thrombosis and superficial venous thrombosis for flights five hours or longer in duration. Physicians and travellers can review relevant pretravel health information, including required and recommended immunizations, health concerns, and other travel resources appropriate for any destination worldwide on the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention travel website.

In their own interest, people with COPD should follow instructions regarding their medical examination and follow up till they board the plane and be mindful to do's and don'ts before and during the travel. It is a legal requirement that they sign the following undertaking, before their request for special assistance is processed: "*I am prepared at my own risk to bear any consequences which carriage by air may have for my state of health and I release the carrier, its employee's servants and agents from any liability for such consequences. I agree to*

reimburse the carrier upon demand for any special expenditures or costs in connection with my carriage" [7].

Conclusions

In summary, people affected by COPD with stable and mild disease should not be routinely checked before flying. All the others with late intensification of disease, new changes in medications, recent acute exacerbation/ hospitalization or anticipated emotional and physical stress during the proposed air travel should be carefully evaluated by the caring family or specialist physician. The official regulatory documents and guidelines are freely accessible. They are clear, specific, easy to comprehend and practicable both for the intending traveller and the attending physician. The latest IATA regulations make it clear that it is entire discretion of the airline(s) whom, and on what conditions, to carry on board. They have enforced a strict procedure of medical clearance for those in need of special assistance which should be taken seriously by the intending traveller. This in order to provide the best comfort and safety of all passengers but also caring for those more fragile including COPD patients.

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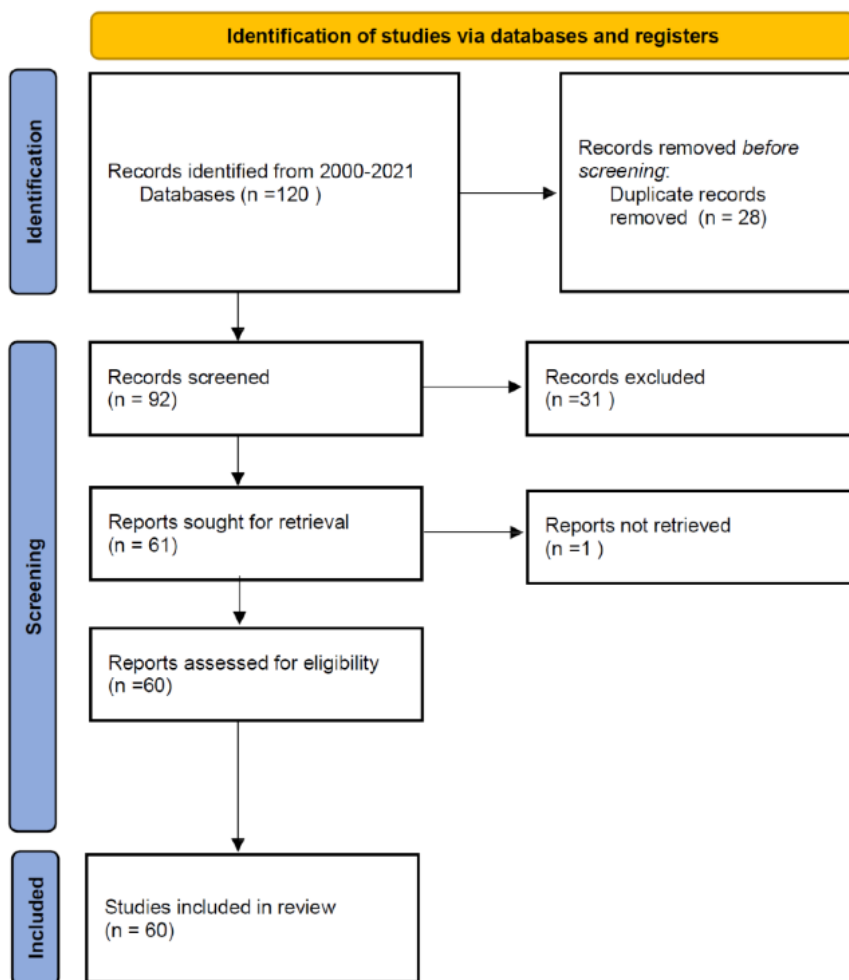
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Table 1. Estimated PiO_2 and equivalent FiO_2 at sea level.

	meters	feet	Pa, mmHg	PiO_2 , mmHg	SL equivalent FiO_2
High	Sea level	Sea level	796.6	149.1	0.209
	1500	4921	640.8	124.3	0.174
Very high	3500	11483	505.4	95.9	0.135
	5500	18045	393.9	72.6	0.102
Extremely high	10000	32808	215.2	35.2	0.049

Pa: atmospheric pressure; PiO_2 : Partial pressure of inspired oxygen; FiO_2 : inspiratory oxygen fraction; SL: Sea level.

Figure 1. Flow diagram for new systemic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only.



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Figure 2 legend: Flow chart of evaluation of fitness to fly.

