



# Flying with Dementia

An informative guide



UNIVERSITY OF  
PLYMOUTH

Heathrow

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## Introduction

**Airports can be complex, busy, confusing places at the best of times. For passengers who have dementia, the prospect of going through an airport terminal can be particularly concerning. By following a few simple “top tips” it doesn’t need to be a stressful experience.**

Heathrow is the only hub airport in the UK. It operates four terminals and two runways. A lot of the worry or anxiety about your visit to the airport can be alleviated by doing some planning ahead, and by knowing what assistance is available to you once you get here. Also, just knowing how things work and what to expect can help.

This guide has been written to give you some handy hints and tips that may help you for your next journey through Heathrow, be it for business or leisure.

There are many businesses that operate out of Heathrow, from retailers to construction companies to airlines, so you are never far away from somebody to help you, should you need it.

The content of this guide has been informed by people who are living with dementia and who have shared their experiences of travelling through airports. The quotes are from doctoral research undertaken by Katherine Turner at the University of Plymouth who investigated the accessibility of air travel for people living with dementia.

This guide is the result of a collaboration between Heathrow Airport, Members of the Prime Ministers Dementia Challenge Group for Air Transport and research from the University of Plymouth.

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## Assistance Service

Heathrow operates an Assistance Service in every terminal to help people with a range of disabilities and health conditions (both visible or non-visible). Most people assume that it is only there to help people with mobility issues as they see the wheelchairs and buggies, but it can be used by anybody who thinks that it would be of help to them due to their health condition.

For example, if your main concern is just going through the security process, you can ask to be escorted through there and then carry on by yourself after that. If you just want someone to walk down to gate room where you will board your aircraft with you to make sure you get to the right one, they can do that for you. It is a flexible service which you can use in a way that suits you best.

The dominance of the wheelchair symbol at the airport special assistance counter and the continued use of the aviation acronym 'PRM' (People with Reduced Mobility) can prevent people with non-visible disabilities like dementia from asking for the support they are entitled to.

Heathrow Airport in the UK no longer uses "PRM" as Sara Marchant, Service Manager for the Heathrow Passengers Requiring Support Service, explains<sup>1</sup>:



...We have stopped using PRM and are now using the phrase "passengers requiring support" or "PRS" as we think this is a much more inclusive and realistic description. It raises our bar from concentrating on the 2.7% of our passengers who have mobility issues to include the 39% of passengers who tell us they have some form of support requirement when travelling through the airport.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth



You should book the service via your airline or travel agent ideally at least 48 hours in advance. If you forget to book it in advance, we will still provide the service, but it may take a little longer to find a free colleague to help you, so book in advance if you are able.

Some passengers living with dementia find the air travel journey extremely difficult to negotiate and need support to enable them to continue to travel by air. This support may come from different people and to varying degrees as George succinctly explains below:



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth

You just need someone to hold your hand metaphorically or actually  
(George\* – Dementia Friendly Flying Research Participant).



Assistance Service hosted areas can be found both before and after security in each terminal. Look for the blue signs.

We also have maps on our website ([www.heathrow.com](http://www.heathrow.com)) showing their location. If you can't find them, we also have lots of "Help Points" on the forecourts and in the terminal buildings. You can press a button to speak to the Assistance Service and they will send someone out to help you.

1. Marchant, S., Heathrow Survey and PRS (Personal email to Warren, A. and Turner, K.). 2021.

\*Pseudonym

# The Sunflower Lanyard

If you don't already have one, you may want to consider wearing a sunflower lanyard. The lanyard acts as a discreet signifier to colleagues that the person wearing it (or somebody in their party) has a non-visible disability or condition and may need a little more help or time.

Lanyards are of course entirely optional, but some people find that wearing a sunflower lanyard gives them the confidence to ask for help without being judged, and it is up to the wearer how much personal information (if any) they want to share with others.

The lanyard is yours to keep and use wherever you wish. Having a sunflower lanyard does not mean that you will automatically receive help from the Assistance Service. You will still need to book it 48 hours ahead for every trip you make.

People living with dementia and those who travel with them are entitled to support in the airport environment and on the aircraft, but that help does need to be requested from the airline at least 48 hours prior to travel. Most UK airports now have a non-visible disability lanyard or wristband to help airport staff identify the person wearing it may need additional support. Some airports also offer pre-travel familiarisation visits to help people understand which parts of the air travel journey may be difficult and the support that is available to overcome these challenges.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth



Whilst wearing the sunflower lanyard indicates that you have a non-visible disability or health condition, people around you will not know what that disability is, so if you need specific help, please ask for it. Colleagues will always try their best to accommodate it if they are able.



One of the biggest ways to have help is to ask. Don't be afraid to ask and, yeah it's a private thing, but if you're going to be private about it, don't complain if you need the help and haven't asked. It has to be a two-way thing. We have the responsibility to say 'I need help

(Judith\* – Dementia Friendly Flying Research Participant).

\*Pseudonym

# Security

**Security is often an area that causes anxiety.**

People living with dementia may struggle with complex instructions and automated areas of the airport. Their travel companions can be expert communicators, and can help to provide instructions in a way that the person living with dementia will understand, but this skill is not always recognised by airport staff.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth



The first time I went [into a body scanner] I was totally thrown and Judith was trying to come forward [shouts] 'WHOA, DON'T COME ANY CLOSER'. She said 'he's got dementia, I just want to explain to him how you stand

(Alan\* – Dementia Friendly Flying Research Participant).

\*Pseudonym



## Top Tips

**Airports can be complex, busy, confusing places at the best of times. For passengers who have a non-visible health condition, the prospect of going through security can be particularly concerning.**

All airports are required to screen passengers entering the departure lounges to be certain that nothing dangerous can be carried on to an aircraft. There are no exemptions to this rule, meaning everybody has to be screened. There are things that you can do to make your journey through security as simple and stress-free as possible so here are a few pointers.

- Arrive in plenty of time. If you are rushed, it is easy to forget and leave things such as liquids in your hand luggage which will mean it is selected for search.
- Make sure you know which terminal you are flying from. Planning ahead can save you considerable time and effort.
- Check the website of the airport you are flying from. There is a wealth of information on there, and lots of additional help and advice. There is a dedicated area of the Heathrow airport that gives lots of information and advice for people who have both visible and non-visible disabilities.
- Have your boarding card ready as you arrive at security. You don't need your passport at this point.
- Some airports offer a "Family and Assistance" lane and some have a Premium security lane. Both these options are available to you, although there may be a charge for Premium. Of course, you can go through the main security area as well. It is your choice which route to take, but the officers on the Family and Assistance lane will be expecting to see passengers who have mobility issues and non-visible disabilities and health conditions.
- Make sure you have removed all liquids, gels, pastes and creams from your hand luggage and placed them in a clear 20cm by 20cm plastic bag. Liquids must be no larger than 100ml, and they must fit inside the bag which must be sealed. There is a limit of one bag per person. Remember, this applies to all liquids and will include things such as make up, toothpaste, perfume and foodstuffs.
- If you have prescription medication that you need on the flight, you can take it even if it is larger than 100ml, provided it has the prescription label on it or GP headed medical authorisation paperwork. It will be subject to non-invasive testing by the security team.
- Take your laptop, tablets or other large electrical devices out of your bag. They need to be screened separately (they can go in the same tray as your bag though).
- Remove your coat or jacket and put them in the tray along with your other belongings.

- If you are picked for a search, you can ask the officer to have the search undertaken in private. You will be able to take someone with you, and the officer will do likewise. You will be able to go to a separate room, where the search can be undertaken discreetly. If you are in any pain, inform the officer prior to the search.
- You should never be separated from your travelling companion, except to each walk individually through the metal detector or body scanner. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, ask to speak to a supervisor who should be able to help.



I was ushered through [security] and Jack was still there and his bag was...so Jack was like the rabbit in the headlights. I couldn't believe how stressed he was

(Gill\* - Dementia Friendly Flying Research participant)

Separating people living with dementia can be very stressful, particularly at those more difficult aspects of the airport such as security where there are complex instructions to follow and it is noisy and fast-paced. People living with dementia may struggle to follow security instructions without support and can find identifying and collecting their items from the security scanning belt challenging.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth

Guidance from the UK Civil Aviation Authority is clear that people with non-visible disabilities like dementia should not be separated from their companions at the airport or inflight.<sup>2</sup>

2. CAA, CAA guidance for airports on providing assistance to people with non-visible disabilities CAP1411. 2016, Civil Aviation Authority: West Sussex.

\*Pseudonym

## The Airport Environment

Once through security there are plenty of options for shopping, dining and relaxing. You may choose to pay to use one of the lounges. Alternatively, there are quiet areas that you may like to use, or our hosted Assistance Service areas.

Some of the retail outlets can be quite bright, colourful and can create sensory overload. If you prefer, we can offer a personal shopper or “reserve and collect” service (see [www.heathrow.com](http://www.heathrow.com) for details).

All the signage around the airport uses universally recognised pictograms wherever possible. Directional signage is black on yellow for optimal colour contrast. We try not to use up or down arrows wherever possible, but if we do have to use them to indicate a change of floor is required, it should be accompanied by a pictogram of some stairs or a lift to make it very clear what is required.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth

Throughout the airport we always try to give people choice wherever possible. For example, when returning to Heathrow, if you are directed towards the automated passport readers when you reach immigration but would rather not use them, just say that you would rather see an officer instead and you will be directed towards their desks.



Some of [the floors] have got little flecks in and you see people trying to pick them up... [they] worry about what it is

(Tommy\* - Dementia Friendly Flying Research participant)

\*Pseudonym

## Communication

All of our Assistance Service and passenger-facing colleagues attend regular disability awareness sessions and many hundreds of them are dementia friends or dementia champions. Many of them have family members or friends who have been affected by dementia.

We always underpin all of our awareness sessions with empathy as we believe that it takes no specialist training or medical knowledge to simply be kind and to treat everybody as if they were one of the family. If ever you need any help at any point in your journey through the airport, just look for anybody wearing any colour of lanyard with an airport ID badge on the end of it. If for any reason they can't help you themselves, they will be able to call somebody who can.

Customer facing staff can literally make or break a person living with dementia's experience.

Dementia friendly staff are a cornerstone of any dementia friendly setting. Key attributes include having an awareness of dementia, being patient, understanding, empathetic and non-judgmental and focussing on what people with dementia can do rather than what they cannot.<sup>3</sup>

Some airports are aiming to increase the level of customer facing staff training related to non-visible disabilities.



Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth

3. Crampton, J. and R. Eley, Dementia-friendly communities: what the project 'Creating a dementia-friendly York' can tell us. Working with Older People: Community Care Policy & Practice, 2013. 17(2): p. 49-57.



## Acknowledgements

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[the upward facing arrow] totally confused me and [friend's name] I said 'well that's odd, the toilets must be upstairs' ...and he said 'well the toilets are down there aren't they?' And I said 'well I thought they were', but the sign was actually pointing up

(Len\* - Dementia Friendly Flying Research participant)

Simple changes to signage can help people living with dementia to negotiate environments more independently. Signs should be clear, well lit, non-reflective, mounted at eye level and preferably have words and pictures on them. Plain language should be used when there is a risk of confusion such as where something is 'upstairs', 'downstairs', or 'straight on'.<sup>4</sup>

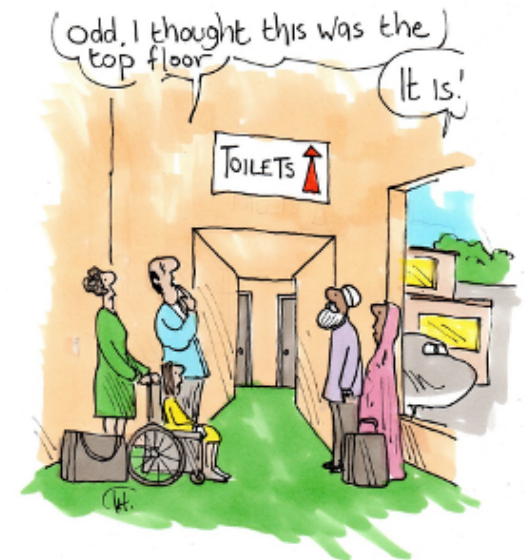


Image © Katherine Turner, Alison Warren & Ian Sherriff, University of Plymouth

4. Transportation Research Board, Airport Co-Operative Research Program (ARCP) Research Report 177: Enhancing wayfinding for aging travelers and persons with disabilities. 2019, Washington, DC: The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine.

\*Pseudonym





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