

From pushchairs to drug lists – a guide to travelling with ageing parents

Multi-generational holidays need not be stressful if you cover these bases.



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My sister and I locked eyes. This wasn't going to work, was it? Ahead of us stretched narrow cobbled pavements and swarms of tourists.

There was no way we were going to be able to push our mother in a wheelchair to the Arashiyama bamboo forest 1km away.

We had barely gone 100m when we admitted defeat.

“Sorry, Mum, you'll have to walk,” we said.

She struggled to her feet. “It's okay,” she said. “I can walk.”

My sister returned the wheelchair to the information counter at the train station where we had borrowed it. When she came back, we walked with our mum, slowly, to the forest.

It was December 2023 and we were on our first family holiday to Japan since before the Covid-19 pandemic.

I'd planned an ambitious 11-day itinerary spanning Tokyo and Kyoto that involved train journeys, four changes of hotels and a fair amount of walking.

Pre-Covid-19, my mother, who is now 89, had always been game for travel, and we had gone on family trips to Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Britain and Spain.

But four years of being stuck at home had made her nervous about travelling. Her legs had grown weaker and she fretted about bathroom access.

In the months leading up to the holiday, I scrambled for solutions.

My mother had a walking cane which she rarely used. She would need to use a cane on our trip, and a sturdier one at that, I decided.

A search online opened up a world of options – collapsible canes, folding seat canes, canes with crook handles.

We went to Rainbow Care, a homecare equipment store in Kampong Ubi Industrial Estate which I had chanced upon on Google. It is a treasure trove of ageing care essentials, from hospital beds to bathroom aids.

After trying out a dozen canes, my mother chose a three-legged aluminium walking stick that cost \$24. It felt more steady than the single-legged version and less clunky than the four-legged and six-legged variety. It came in her favourite colour of purple, too.

As the trip neared, however, I started to have doubts over whether the walking stick would be enough. What if the distances were too much? Would a wheelchair be better? Did I now have to buy a wheelchair?

Google led me to travel pushchairs for adults. These are essentially chairs on wheels and lighter and more portable than wheelchairs.

I bought a pushchair on Lazada for about \$200. The brakes, controlled by the person pushing the chair, felt sturdy enough. The 8kg chair could be folded and packed into a nylon bag – bulky but manageable.

I took my mother for a trial run at a shopping mall. She got in and out of the chair with some difficulty. Also, the seat was hard and the seatbelt looked flimsy. But she enjoyed being wheeled around.

In the end, I left the pushchair at home. It probably wouldn't be very safe on uneven roads and I didn't want to lug it around.

My mother went to Japan aided only by her new walking stick. We splurged on taxis, saving the walking for attractions such as the Arashiyama bamboo forest in Kyoto. Where we could, like at malls, we borrowed a wheelchair.

We had a wonderful time and



the holiday helped her regain her confidence in travelling. In the year since, we have visited Jeju Island, Fukuoka and Melbourne.

Going on holiday with ageing parents is a privilege. You create memories before you can no longer do so, and giving them a good time is a way to express gratitude for what they have done for you.

But it can be exhausting to be a caregiver in a foreign land, especially when you aren't exactly young yourself. Many things can go wrong.

To help plan better for future trips, I spoke with experts for practical tips.

WHERE TO GO?

Mobility should be a key consideration when planning trips with seniors, said Mr Jeremiah Wong, assistant director, marketing communications, at Chan Brothers Travel.

Back-to-back excursions and multi-city hopping can be physically demanding and should be avoided.

Logistical details matter: ground-floor hotel rooms are preferable if no lifts are available, and tour buses with stepping boards help seniors get on and off with ease.

Managing expectations in multi-generational groups can be tricky.

Mr Wong said seniors often want to make the most of their travels, but must avoid over-exertion. Meanwhile, younger travellers prefer a more active pace and might feel they are missing out on experiences to cater to the needs of elderly family members.

To address this, Chan Brothers designs tours that combine “iconic, bucket-list experiences and relaxed, low-stress activities”, he said. For instance, its Hokkaido Shiretoko Peninsula tour offers a drift ice walk for fitter participants while older travellers enjoy the sights.

If you're planning a holiday yourself, factor in options at an attraction. At Arashiyama bamboo forest, my husband went off alone to explore the area on a bicycle while my sister and I walked with my mother. We met up a few hours later, everyone happy.

A MEDICATION LIST

Dr David Tan, director of clinical services at National University Polyclinics, emphasised the importance of compiling a complete medication list before travelling so you don't forget essential medications.

HealthHub, the national health

portal that is available online and as an app, has information that can help compile this drug checklist. A family general practitioner should also be able to help you draw it up.

Some pharmacies overseas may allow medications to be bought based on a list that seniors provide, but others may require a local doctor's prescription, Dr Tan added.

Once, a patient in his 70s forgot his medications when he went on a holiday to Bangkok. “I had to get a prescription out to him, and thankfully, he managed to buy it from a pharmacy over there,” he said.

Travellers should bring enough medication for the entire trip and pack it in carry-on luggage to avoid issues with lost or delayed bags. Dr Tan said temperature-sensitive medications such as insulin should especially not be checked in, as extreme temperatures in luggage-hold areas can freeze and spoil them.

As for medication that must be taken at certain times of the day, he said the rule of thumb is to try to keep to a Singapore-time schedule while travelling, such as on the plane across time zones.

“Once arriving in the country, especially for longer trips, the senior should then take the medications according to the destination time zone,” he said. If you are travelling far away, it is best to discuss with your doctor the schedule.

PREVENTING DVT

A commonly held fear of long-distance flying is deep vein thrombosis (DVT), where a blood clot forms in one or more of the deep veins in the body, usually in the legs.

Flights longer than eight hours pose the highest risk of DVT, said Dr Alexa Lai, associate consultant, geriatric medicine, at Ng Teng Fong General Hospital.

“However, the absolute risk of developing a DVT from flying is very small unless you have additional risk factors,” she said. Risk rises with age (over 60), previous history of blood clots, obesity, smoking or certain cancers.

Simple measures to prevent DVT during flights include flexing and extending your ankles and walking up and down the aisle every few hours. Keep hydrated and limit caffeine and alcohol as they can cause diuresis (increase in the amount of urine made by the kidney and passed from the body) and dehydration, she said.

As for the usefulness of compression socks when flying, Dr Tan said they can help prevent

the pooling of blood in the legs, but cautioned that the socks must not be too loose or too tight.

INCONTINENCE AND CONSTIPATION

Age-related bladder changes can cause incontinence, and the loss of bladder control is especially inconvenient when travelling with no bathroom in sight.

Ageing brings about an increase in residual urine in the bladder even after passing urine, and uninhibited bladder muscle contraction, said Dr Lai. At the same time, ageing results in a decrease in bladder capacity and ability to hold urine in.

She suggested planning to know where bathrooms are and to schedule bathroom breaks every two to three hours. Also, avoid bladder irritants such as tea, coffee, hot chocolate and alcohol before long trips.

“Bring pads and extra underwear, wear clothing that is easy to remove in the washroom, such as elastic waistbands, and wear dark colours that can hide leaks,” she added. “If urinary incontinence happens frequently, place barrier cream near the inner thighs to prevent irritation.”

Doctors say avoiding alcohol and caffeinated drinks while travelling long distances or when toilets may be inaccessible will also reduce accidents. Senior travellers might want to check out disposable leakage protection panties.

Travel can disrupt routines, leading to constipation.

Dr Lai's advice is to maintain your usual schedule for bowel movements.

“If the person passes motion in the morning in Singapore, aim to clear the bowels in the morning of whichever country they are in as well,” she said. “Most importantly, do not suppress the urge to pass stool.”

Travellers should stay hydrated, eat fibre-rich food like fruits and vegetables, avoid high-fat food and incorporate food with gut-healthy probiotics, like yogurt and fermented foods.

Over-the-counter laxatives such as stool softeners like lactulose should be packed for emergencies. “Don't wait too long before taking laxatives if you need them,” said Dr Lai.

“Prolonged constipation – that is, two days for most seniors – can lead to faecal impaction, abdominal pain and haemorrhoids.”

VACCINATION

Doctors recommended flu vaccinations for elderly travellers, particularly when visiting the

Northern Hemisphere.

“The elderly are a high-risk group for serious complications arising from the common flu,” said Dr Lai. “The flu season for the Northern Hemisphere peaks from October to March so do get vaccinated before, ideally two weeks before.”

CHECKING IN AND FLYING

A Changi Airport Group (CAG) spokesman advised elderly passengers to check in early to reduce any stressful last-minute rush.

Those who need help with heavy baggage can hire the Changi Airport Porter Service available at all terminals. Porters will carry luggage from vehicles at the kerbside to the check-in counter, or from the baggage claim belt to vehicles. Bookings online must be made at least six hours before the flight. It costs \$5 per item (minimum \$15) for up to 20 items.

Passengers with mobility issues can ask for complimentary wheelchairs at Changi Airport's information counters or book them online, on a first come, first served basis.

Passengers can also request wheelchairs as well as assistance from their airlines.

A Singapore Airlines (SIA) spokesman said customers who require battery-powered wheelchairs or assistive devices such as mobility scooters or crutches should contact the local SIA office at least 48 hours before their flight (the Singapore number is 6223-8888).

Those who require normal wheelchairs and special assistance should contact the airline at least 24 hours before their flight, via the hotline or online chat with an agent on the website.

SIA's meet-and-assist service team helps customers from check-in to boarding, with the cabin crew taking over on board. This service continues upon arrival until the customer reaches the arrival hall.

The service is free to passengers, and you should let the airline know if you need help on the return flight too.

My mother has tried SIA's wheelchair and meet-and-greet service several times, and it has been superb, with faster clearance through immigration and early boarding of the plane.

Service staff at some airports pushed her in a wheelchair all the way to the taxi queue. At the Melbourne airport, the woman helping us even used her phone to call a driver we had booked to let him know where we were.

A bonus has been how the rest

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of us travelling with my mother were allowed to accompany her, skipping immigration queues as well.

The CAG spokesman advised passengers carrying liquid medication over the 100ml limit to prepare a doctor's note or supporting documents to present to security officers. Those with medical devices like pacemakers or insulin pumps should also inform security staff to accommodate screening needs.

The spokesman also had a tech tip for stress-free travel: Download the Changi App. It provides real-time flight updates and notifications of gate changes or delays without you needing to squint at terminal screens.

SIA said it considers requests to change seats in the same cabin class on a case-by-case basis but the elderly can't be in emergency exit row seats for safety reasons.

Aisle seats provide more space than window or middle seats, easy access to the toilet, and greater freedom to move around, though the downside is more disturbances.

For a Scoot flight without footrests to Jeju, my mother loved a \$15 travel foot “hammock” I bought on Amazon for her. You sling it over the tray table and rest your feet on the sling.

INSURANCE COVERAGE

Pre-existing conditions matter when you buy travel insurance, said Ms Annie Chua, vice-president and head of key accounts at Income Insurance.

Common chronic conditions like hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidaemia are commonly excluded from standard travel insurance plans, she said.

Emergency medical expenses can range from \$40,000 to \$250,000, especially when evacuation by air ambulance back to Singapore is required, she said.

“It is imperative for the elderly to be adequately covered with travel insurance plans that cover pre-existing medical conditions, even for day trips to Johor Bahru,” she said.

Ms Chua also recommended buying travel insurance earlier rather than too close to travel dates. This provides protection against trip cancellations or delays leading up to the departure date.

Travelling with ageing parents involves planning for contingencies and comes with challenges.

Our trips with my mother have been far from perfect. On one holiday, she forgot her eye drops that prevent glaucoma. We've lost her in the crowd. (I've since activated the Find My iPhone functions on our phones. I have friends whose parents carry AirTags on them).

I've been guilty of packing our days with too many activities, walking too fast, making her walk too much, and choosing restaurants with food I like rather than what suits her palate.

Spending days at close quarters has led to tension and squabbles.

But the thing about family holidays is how, when you look back on them, you remember only the good bits – and can't wait to book the next trip.