

Option #3: Ignore the fact that I'm a human fart noise machine and just pretend I didn't notice."

Sometimes you can crack a joke to break an awkward silence. For example, if your stoma makes that unmistakable sound in front of co-workers who know you're an ostomate, you could dart a glance at your tummy and stage-whisper "Hush up. No-one cares what you think!" Yes, it's embarrassing. But that ship has sailed. The best you can do now is show others it's no big deal. They'll probably be relieved, share a chuckle, and get back to what they were talking about.

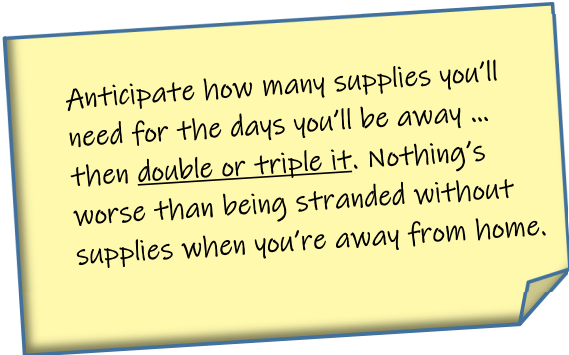
Travel

Travelling with an ostomy can be easy-peazy. It just takes a little thinking ahead.

General travel tips

If you'll be away from home for an extended period, check if there's a local source to buy ostomy supplies. Even if you're sure you've packed enough, you'll feel more secure knowing back-ups are available.

Try to keep to your usual eating practices while you're away. This is no time to try something new and exotic, or to treat yourself to something you know will make you gassy or affect your output in a significant way.



Anticipate how many supplies you'll need for the days you'll be away ... then double or triple it. Nothing's worse than being stranded without supplies when you're away from home.

If you feel the local water might be a little iffy, use bottled water – not just for drinking, but also for washing your stoma area and rinsing out your pouches. If you thought travelers' diarrhea was bad before, imagine having it with an ostomy!

Hotels

Staying at a hotel is nothing to worry about. It just takes a little consideration. The most common concern is what to do about the disposal of used ostomy supplies. Resealable plastic bags and odor control bags (preferably not transparent) are the solution here. They can be deposited in a bathroom trash basket, which is emptied daily.

Chambermaids have said that compared to some of the indescribable messes they've had to clean up (visions of rock stars with goats in their rooms and body fluids dripping down the walls), a well-sealed, non-smelling, tidily packaged bag of poop isn't worth a second thought. If the outside bag isn't see-through, they'll probably never realize what's in it anyway. And even if they did, they'd appreciate the trouble you took.

Another concern about hotel stays is the potential of soiling bed sheets. For peace of mind, you can always pack a few disposable incontinence pads to sleep on, laid over the bottom sheet. If a pad gets soiled, it can be placed in a plastic bag too. So bring some larger odor control trash bags if you think there's a risk, and double bag if necessary.

In the worst-case scenario, if a bit of a mess happens, don't panic. Just call the housekeeping department and explain your situation. Again, they've seen things a thousand times worse. This is their job. And if you happen to run into an employee who resents it, then blow it off. It means they have a much bigger problem than your little accident.

Being a houseguest

Staying at someone's home raises many of the same concerns as staying at a hotel, or on a cruise ship for that matter.

Resealable plastic bags and odor control bags can solve any disposal problems. But rather than leaving the bags in a waste basket in the bathroom, particularly one that's shared with others, you could always keep the bags in your own bedroom until they can be deposited in an outdoor garbage can.

For extra peace of mind, you can pack a bottle of a nice-smelling essential oil and some cotton balls. Dab a few drops of oil on a cotton ball and put it wherever you're keeping your "bag of bags." Freshen as needed.

If you're staying in someone's home, it's probably a friend or family member who knows about your ostomy. So you should feel comfortable asking where you can dispose of your sealed bags. Maybe there's a garbage can in the garage. When do they put out the trash for pick-up? When they realize this is no big deal for you, just a minor detail that's easy to accommodate, they'll feel more relaxed about it too.

Actually, if this is your first visit since having an ostomy, your hosts may have their own questions they're hesitant to ask. Like most of us before our surgeries, they're probably totally clueless about how this ostomy business works. So if you're comfortable, bring it up in conversation prior to your visit. Let them know if there's anything they can do to ensure a relaxed and happy experience for everyone.

For example, if you have any dietary issues – like doing best with a low residue or high fiber diet, or needing to avoid particular foods because they've caused you blockages in the past – give your hosts a heads-up. There's nothing more frustrating than laying out a lovely spread for guests, only to suddenly learn that Uncle Joe's new wife is deathly allergic to shellfish and cousin Shlomo just turned vegan! In the same way, they won't want to feed you anything that will cause you discomfort. So give them a chance to do a little menu planning before your visit. They'll appreciate it.

Air travel

A lot of people flying with an ostomy for the first time are apprehensive about airport security checks. Although many airport personnel have been taught about ostomies, you can't always rely on that. You might prefer to tell them you have an ostomy before they start eyeing that suspicious bulge under your shirt.

You can carry a doctor's note explaining that you have an ostomy, or print out a "Travel Communication Card" created for that purpose by the United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc. (available on their website). This doesn't guarantee you won't be screened or patted down, but it can come in handy if you're dealing with a security officer who just doesn't get it.

They might ask you to rub your hand over your pouch (on the outside of your clothing), and then test your hand to make sure there's no residue of an explosive. That's pretty standard and nothing to worry about.

Keep your supplies with you. This is definitely carry-on material, not checked baggage. You don't want to land in Cabo San Lucas, only to find that your ostomy supplies are winging their way to France! Besides, even if you eventually got them back, they'd probably be very snooty and burp with a French accent.

If you cut your own baseplate holes, cut them all before you leave. You could pack ostomy scissors in your travel kit, but rules on the size of scissors you're allowed to carry on a plane can vary by jurisdiction. In some countries, you can't bring any scissors onto the aircraft with you. Again, this is a better safe than sorry scenario. If you must carry scissors, it's best to put them in your checked luggage.

Check out the rules for liquids too. Your bottles of lubricating oil or hand sanitizer might exceed the limits on size or quantity. At many airports, medical supplies are ok if they're labelled and prescribed. But you never know when you'll run into a customs or security agent who got up on the wrong side of the bed that morning and wants to be difficult. The odds are probably in your favor but personally, I'd rather do my gambling in Vegas.

Be especially careful about eating or drinking before a flight, and empty your pouch shortly before boarding, to reduce the need to burp or empty it en route. Also, don't consume anything during the flight that you know from experience might cause gas or excessive output. Airplane bathrooms are hardly big enough to change your mind, let alone an ostomy pouch!

Many ostomates have heard that air pressure can cause the gas inside an ostomy pouch to expand slightly at high altitudes. There have been some scientific studies to suggest this, in theory. But I've never heard of it actually happening in real life – at least not to the extent of the pouch being pulled off someone's abdomen or “exploding” (as some people fear). In fact, there are many other reasons why you may experience a little more gas on an airplane, causing the pouch to balloon slightly. But as long as you have a filter that works, and burp your pouch if necessary, you'll be just fine.

Road trips or camping

The main challenge here, of course, is limited access to toilet facilities. Or even none at all. But don't let that put you off. You just have to be more creative.

A good trick is to have something you can line with a plastic bag. Could be a coffee can, a big glass jar, or a plastic food container – anything with a tight-fitting lid. Line it with a plastic bag, empty your ostomy pouch or drop your used appliance into it, and cover it with the lid until you can tie up the plastic bag and dispose of it.

Obviously, you're going to need a well-stocked kit of supplies, including packets of wipes and hand sanitizers, and lots of plastic bags.

Keep bottled water on hand to help with cleaning & rinsing.

At least one company makes a nifty device that's essentially a folding plastic bucket you strap around your waist. Again, you line it with a plastic bag, empty your output (and anything else, like used wipes, used baseplates, etc.) into the bucket, tie up the bag, and dispose of it. The main advantages here are that you can do a complete change with both hands, while standing or sitting, and you don't have to worry about your stoma leaking while it's exposed. Everything will fall into the bag-lined bucket. It's a great solution to the problem of pouch changes when there are no bathrooms around.

Used plastic bags can be disposed of in various ways. If you've emptied only output into a biodegradable bag (i.e., no foil-wrapped wipes or other non-biodegradables), you can bury it in the woods. Otherwise, hang onto the tied-up bags until you can put them in a trash receptacle. You should have a supply of larger odor-controlled bags to collect them in, until the right opportunity arises.

Swimming

Many new ostomates wonder if they'll be able to swim again.

Can you do it?

Absolutely! By far, most people with ostomies report that they can swim freely in pools and oceans, for any length of time, and in any temperature of water, with no problems. Many are scuba diving, surfing, and waterskiing like they used to.

Of course, like any other aspect of life with an ostomy, there are individual differences. A few people have reported that their baseplate loosens after prolonged exposure to water, or in a hot tub, or that salt water affects the baseplate's adhesion. They're a really small minority, but you won't know for sure how it will be for you until you try. So take a deep breath, hold your nose, and jump in!

If your pouch has a filter (allowing gas to escape), cover it with a sticker that probably came with your pouches. An uncovered filter won't work if it gets wet or clogged with sand.

After the swim, you might find the baseplate is harder than usual to remove. That's because some of them are made to grip on even tighter when wet – which is reassuring, actually. Just remember that you might need to let it dry out before peeling it off.