

Coping With Flight Delays

Facts for Air Travelers from the Aviation Consumer Protection Division

Most airline trips are uneventful; however, airlines don't guarantee their schedules, and you should realize this when planning your trip. There are many things that can make it impossible for flights to arrive on time. Some of these problems, such as bad weather and resulting air traffic delays, are beyond the airlines' control. Others, such as the need for mechanical repairs, are hard to cannot be predicted. Nevertheless, you can take steps to reduce your chances of encountering most problems and limit their effects.

When booking your flight, remember that a departure early in the day is less likely to be delayed than a later flight, due in part to the "ripple" effects of delays throughout the day. Also, if an early flight does get delayed or canceled, you may have more rerouting options. If you book the *last* flight of the day and it is canceled, you could get stuck overnight.

In general, you are least likely to be delayed on nonstop flights. A connection (change of planes) always involves the possibility of a misconnection. On a direct flight (intermediate stop, no change of planes), the second leg could be delayed or canceled. If you choose a flight with a stop or connection, try to select one stopping at the least-congested enroute airport in order to reduce the risk of delay or misconnection. You may wish to take into consideration the seasonal variations in weather if you have a choice of connecting cities. For example, airports in the south might have fewer winter snowstorms but more spring and summer thunderstorms. If you are making a reservation close to your departure date, the FAA web site [<http://www.fly.faa.gov>] can provide timely information on air traffic and weather-related delays on a real-time basis. When booking a connection, always check the amount of time between flights. Ask yourself what will happen if the first flight is delayed; if you don't like the answer, pick another flight or ask the agent to "construct" a connection that allows more time.

Certain airports are more congested than others are. Also, flights during peak travel times of the day (e.g., 4:00-6:00 p.m.) are more susceptible to delay. Examine flights to all airports that serve your destination city. Ask about the on-time performance of each flight you are considering. The Department requires the major U.S. airlines to make this information available upon request if you make a reservation through the carrier. These airlines also make the same information available through their Computer Reservations Systems to consumers booking through travel agents.

The Department summarizes on-time performance information of the major U.S. airlines in its monthly [Air Travel Consumer Report](#). Much more detailed flight delay information is also available on the web site of the Department's Bureau of Transportation Statistics at <http://www.bts.gov/oai>.

Call the airline well ahead of your departure time to check on your flight's status. If there is a problem, try to rebook over the telephone. While airlines often try to call to notify you of schedule changes, it may not be possible to do so if the airline becomes aware of the delay only shortly before the flight. It is wise to check. Also, make sure your airline's record of your reservation contains a telephone number where you can be reached, or you will lose any opportunity of being called about a delay or flight change.

If your flight is delayed, try to find out how late it will be so that you can evaluate your options. But keep in mind that it is sometimes difficult for airlines to estimate the total duration of a delay during its early stages. In so-called “creeping delays,” unanticipated developments may occur. Weather that had been forecast to improve can instead deteriorate, or a mechanical problem can turn out to be more complex than initially expected.

If the problem is with local weather or air traffic control, all flights will probably be late and there is not much you or the airline can do to speed up your departure. If there is a mechanical problem with the plane for your particular flight or if the crew is delayed on an incoming flight, you might be better off trying to arrange another flight, as long as you do not have to pay a penalty or higher fare for changing your reservations. (It is sometimes easier to make such arrangements from a pay phone or cell phone than at a ticket counter.) If you find a flight on another airline, ask the first airline to endorse your ticket to the new carrier, which could save you a fare increase. Remember, however, that there is no rule requiring an airline to do this. If you are using an electronic ticket, you will probably have to get paper documentation issued before it can be endorsed to another carrier.

If your flight is canceled, most airlines will rebook you on their next flight to your destination on which space is available, at no additional charge. If this involves a significant delay, find out if another carrier has seats and ask the first airline to endorse your ticket to that carrier. Finding extra seats may be difficult, however, especially over holidays and other peak travel times. You may also demand a refund for a canceled flight.

Each airline has its own policies about what it will do for delayed passengers waiting at the airport. There are no federal requirements regarding these amenities or services. If you are delayed, ask the airline staff if they will pay for meals or phone calls. Some do not provide any amenities to stranded passengers. Others may not offer amenities if bad weather or something else beyond the airline’s control causes the delay. Before you book your flight, you may wish to check the web sites of the larger carriers for their voluntary Customer Service Plans, which list the amenities that those airlines will provide to passengers. Links to those web sites appear on the web site of the Department’s Aviation Consumer Protection Division at <http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/>.

Contrary to the belief of some, airlines are not required to compensate passengers for “damages” when flights are delayed or canceled. Compensation is required by law only when you are “bumped” from a flight that is oversold. Airlines almost always refuse to pay passengers for financial losses resulting from a delayed flight. If the purpose of your trip is to close a potentially lucrative business deal, to give a speech or lecture, to attend a family function, or to be present at any time-sensitive event, you might want to allow a little extra time and take an earlier flight. In other words, airline delays and cancellations are not unusual, and defensive planning is a good idea when time is your most important consideration.

From: DOT, Aviation Consumer Protection Division at
<http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/publications/delays.htm>