

Travelling with MS



by linda mcgowan

As summer approaches, many of us are thinking about travel, both near and far. For those of us with MS, the challenge of an "MS Bladder" sometimes helps to dampen (no pun intended) our plans. There are things to consider in anticipation of any extended time between available washrooms.

Challenges include needing to use the washroom more frequently, urgency, dribbling, and incontinence. Some of these suggestions will work for some people and not for others; however, it is always worth a try. They could help reduce anxiety and discomfort when a pleasant evening or a trip is #1.

Do you empty your bladder? If you have just gone to the washroom and 20 minutes later need to go again, chances are you didn't fully empty your bladder the first time. For women, sitting upright on the toilet makes it very difficult to efficiently empty your entire bladder. What may work is to apply gentle pressure to your lower abdomen while leaning forward and slightly to the right. Notice that this is "gentle pressure" as your bladder is a sensitive organ and does not take kindly to being "beaten up". If you use a wheelchair, place it on the right hand side and lean on the chair for support. Men can bear down, strain a little - gentle pushing with a hand on the lower abdomen helps. The advantage: you will not be disturbed at night and you can go long periods between washrooms.

Products on the market can help: specific protection pads for women or 'benefits for men' give added security. A urinal - available from medical supply retailers - is useful for longer trips. When traveling on an overnight train, I covered myself with a towel (a coat will do) and was able to gain some comfort. Have a lid for the bottle and a friend along who is willing to

make a trip to the washroom to empty and sanitize the bottle. Men can use also wear a condom attached to a leg bag (much like the Indy 500 drivers use).

Practice at home: Assess what you can drink, and how long before you need to empty your bladder. Caffeine should be avoided; likewise, beer, soft drinks, and often water will have an effect of urgency. Reserve this drinking for after you disembark.

On long flights, tomato juice and clamato juice can have a dehydrating effect because of their high sodium content. The swelling in your ankles after sitting on a plane and drinking tomato juice is short-lived. You may be surprised that red wine, in a small quantity (4 oz), will shut your bladder down. Don't ask me why. White wine does not offer me the same reliability but test what works for you. Men find that a larger quantity, 6 to 8 ounces works better, but this is more in relation to weight.

Men have the advantage of being able to empty their bladders almost anywhere. For women, it is not so easy. With practice, I have learned to void over the front of my wheelchair without dribbling on my feet or getting my cushion wet. This is most helpful when toilets are a hole in the ground or there is nowhere to go but behind a tree. Others keep a fold-up camping chair/stool in the trunk and cut a hole in the centre: the canvas is strong and easy to wipe off.

Despite what airlines say, few airplanes have wheelchair accessible washrooms. Most have a small aisle chair; you can make it down the aisle but will then have to transfer from the passageway to the toilet and then back again. This often requires an Olympic type lift. If you need assistance for transfers, make sure you have a trusty and skinny companion with you.

Practice at home. Go forth and enjoy!