



Canadian Autism
Leadership Summit

Sommet canadien du
Leadership en autisme

Guide to a More Accessible Travel to CALS

Autism Alliance of Canada
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Traveling by air or ground transportation can present barriers for Autistic people due to sensory sensitivities, changes in routine, and the crowded environment of airports, train stations etc. as for example the security process. However, with careful planning and knowledge of accessibility options, traveling can be a more comfortable and positive experience.

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Pre-Travel Preparation

Choose an Autism-Friendly Transportation Company:

Some Canadian airlines offer programs to assist Autistic passengers:

- **Air Canada** provides support through their [Non-visible Disabilities Assistance Program](#) for non visible disabilities, offering priority boarding and additional assistance during the flight.
- **WestJet** offers [Assistance services](#), which helps with requests like extra space and calm, quiet seating arrangements.
- The [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program](#) is a way for you to voluntarily share that you have a non-visible disability or condition and that you may need extra help, understanding, or time.
- If you should be travelling by train, [ViaRail](#) offers an extensive service for Autistic people, ensuring the greatest ease and comfort of travel.

Contact the Transportation Company in Advance:

- Inform them about your needs at the time of booking, or at least 48 hours before your flight.
- Ensure the airline has notes on your flight ticket that informs flight attendants of your neurodivergent condition and travel needs, if necessary.
- Request specific accommodations like priority boarding, extra space, or assistance through security.
- Ask about sensory-friendly spaces or quiet zones at Canadian airports if available.

Pack Sensory Tools:

- Noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, weighted blankets, or soothing music can help with sensory overload.



- Bring snacks or comfort items that help maintain your routine.
- Consider downloading calming apps or playlists to have on hand during the flight.

Airport Navigation

Early Arrival:

Arriving early can help reduce stress and give you time to adjust to the airport environment. It allows you to get familiar with the layout, locate quiet spaces, and reduce the pressure of rushing.

Airport Assistance Programs:

Many Canadian airports provide accessible services for Autistic people, such as:

- **Toronto Pearson Airport** offers a [Journey Through the Airport program](#), which includes assistance through security, gate information, and access to quiet spaces. Toronto Pearson Airport is currently trialing a [sensory space](#) that would provide a calm environment following the check-in and security process, helping to mitigate the potentially overwhelming effects of bright lights, sounds from the baggage system, and extensive signage.
- **Vancouver International Airport** provides a **Calm Zone** and offers a range of accessibility services for those with sensory sensitivities, more information about [the services available can be found here](#).
 - Also, AIDE Canada developed [YVR Airport Interactive Travel Skills Training Videos](#).
- **Montreal-Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport** has a **Sensory Room** available for passengers needing a quiet space to relax. All details on [accessibility features](#) are listed here.



- **Ottawa Airport** offers [Airport Assistance Services](#) for travellers with disabilities ensuring an efficient and tireless experience.
 - Ottawa International Airport (YOW) is RHF Accessibility Certified Gold by the Rick Hansen Foundation. The Airport Authority is committed to providing a safe, dignified and welcoming environment for everyone.
 - The airport has adopted the Sunflower Program that allows individuals with a hidden disability to voluntarily share that they may need a little extra help, time and understanding while at the airport. Travelers can request a Sunflower lanyard at the Traveler's Aid desk in either terminal or ticket counter.
- Utilize priority lanes for check-in and security screening, which can make the process smoother.

Onboard the Aircraft

Request Seating Arrangements:

- Consider booking seats in the front or near the wings for a smoother ride, as turbulence is usually felt less in these areas.
- Some airlines allow for extra space or a less crowded seat arrangement if requested.

In-Flight Support & Calming Techniques:

- Notify the flight attendants of your needs when boarding, including if you need assistance with calming tools or extra breaks during the flight.
- Many flight attendants are trained to assist passengers with disabilities, so don't hesitate to ask for help.
- Use your favorite sensory items to reduce anxiety.



Managing Anxiety and Sensory Overload

Prepare for Sensory Stimuli:

- Flights can be noisy and overwhelming. Noise-canceling headphones, earplugs, or listening to calming music can reduce distress.
- Consider sunglasses or a sleep mask to block out excessive lighting, especially if the bright cabin lights feel intrusive.
- Ask for a face mask if other smells on the plane are overwhelming.

Breaks and Movement:

- On long flights, you may need to move around. Let flight attendants know if you need assistance during the flight, such as permission to stand or stretch.

Post-Flight Considerations

- After the flight, disembarking can be overwhelming with crowded hallways. If necessary, request priority assistance to bypass long lines or get help with gathering luggage.
- If needed, ask the airline to provide a designated airport assistant to help you transition from the gate to your next destination.



General Tips

- **Familiarize Yourself with the Schedule:** Routines are important for many Autistic people. Try to stay informed about your flight's schedule and any potential changes. Note that some airlines, such as Air Canada, have apps gathering all the information and steps of the flight process, including gates and boarding.
- **Practice Before Your Flight:** If possible, visit the airport before your actual flight to get used to the sounds, layout, and process.
- **Bring a Support Person:** If it's possible, travel with a companion who understands your needs to help manage stress during the journey.
 - Note: A Canadian carrier must provide the adjacent seating for a necessary support person without charging you an additional fare or any other charges if you are travelling within Canada.
 - When traveling with **Air Canada**, you can book a discounted ticket for your support person on Canadian or U.S. flights only. Further information on the policy can be found [here](#).

Conclusion

By taking the time to plan ahead and utilize available resources, air travel can be a more enjoyable and less stressful experience for Autistic people in Canada. From selecting an autism-friendly airline to accessing support at the airport and on the flight, there are many ways to ensure a smoother journey. Take steps to plan ahead and express your needs clearly to ensure the best possible experience.

We understand that it can be challenging for some Autistic people to anticipate and express their needs clearly, especially in the moment.



Planning ahead or initiating communication can feel abstract or overwhelming in certain situations.

- Consider using tools such as communication cards to express your needs and preferences effectively throughout the journey.
- You can also use the Notes app on your phone and pre-write dialogue on the app explaining airline staff about your needs.
- Other helpful options include pre-written notes or emails for staff, mobile apps that facilitate non-speaking communication, visual aids like cue cards, or traveling with a support person.