

Airlines and Allergies: The Best and Worst Airlines For People With Food Allergies

For food allergy sufferers, flying is complicated, to say the least. With few regulations and little specific information, we are left with many questions; Will my allergens be present on surfaces around me? Can I bring my own food? Who will take care of me if I have an allergic reaction?

To find answers to these questions, a team of Teen Advisory Group members put our heads and communication skills together to create a guide for the best airlines for people with food allergies. Our research includes information from the airlines' websites, travel blogs, food allergy blogs, and other news sources (please refer to "Reference Sources"). We contacted the airlines by email, phone, Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger. To make our final assessment, we combined information gained through these means with our own personal experiences. The 18 of us researched and contacted a total of 36 airlines, domestic and international. Here is the complete list (in alphabetical order):

Aegean Airlines	Frontier Airlines
Aerlingus	Hawaiian Airlines
Aerolineas Argentinas	Iberia Airlines
Aeromexico	Iceland Air
AirAsia	JetBlue Airways
Air Canada	KLM
Air China	Korean Air
Air France	Lufthansa
Air New Zealand	Qantas
Alaska Airlines	Qatar Airlines
Alitalia	SAS
Allegiant Airlines	Singapore Airlines
American Airlines	Southwest Airlines
ANA	Spirit Airlines

British Airways
Cathay Pacific Airlines
Delta Airlines
Emirates

Swiss Airlines
Turkish Airlines
United Airlines
Virgin Atlantic Airways

The only consistency in policy is that all airlines based in the United States are prohibited by law from kicking a passenger off a flight due to food allergies. The international airlines we were able to reach all said they followed the same rule, however there have been incidents where this occurred anyway (Firshein, 2019).

Before providing profiles on individual airlines, the best practices we have determined mark a sign of a food allergy safe airline are:

1. Passengers are allowed to preboard to wipe down their seat and surrounding area
2. The airline offers a variety national brand snacks with limited cross contact (brands may include Nestle, Snyders, Nabisco, etc)
3. The flight crew has consistent knowledge of company food allergy policy
4. The flight crew understands the difference between intolerances (lactose and gluten free meals, for example, are often made for people without allergies) and anaphylaxis and the airline's website reflects this
5. Passengers are allowed to bring their own food on board (extra points if they are willing to heat it up for you, which is especially important on long flights)
6. Epi-pens or Auvi-Qs are carried on board.

We recommend, based off our research, that regardless of how accommodating the airline appears, do these things before you board:

1. Bring your epi-pen(s) in a carryon
2. Call at LEAST 48 hours in advance to remind them of your allergies and alert them when you book the reservation
3. Bring wipes to wipe down your area when you preboard and when food is being served
4. Advise flight attendants of your allergies and of the location of your epi-pen in the event that you do have an allergic reaction
5. Ask (if they do not offer) for them to make a courtesy announcement on your behalf (especially if your allergies are airborne)

Below, you will find:

1. Assessments of the eight largest domestic airlines
2. The three worst domestic airlines
3. The four best domestic airlines
4. Assessments of international airlines known to have treated passengers with food allergies poorly
5. The three worst international airlines with assessments
6. The four best international airlines with assessments

Due to the large number of international airlines and similarities in their practices, assessments of international airlines that are not the best, worst, or known to mistreat food allergy sufferers are not included.

To begin, here are evaluations for the largest US-based airlines:

American Airlines:

American Airlines offers little accommodation for food allergy sufferers. They will not create a "buffer zone" or request that passengers not eat allergens of a passenger on board. They are unwilling to create special meals for people with allergies (only "intolerances"). Furthermore, when referring to those with allergies, they only acknowledged peanut allergies; they do not serve peanuts, although they could be in meals and snacks, and they do serve other nuts. They are historically resistant to preboarding, so passengers are not allowed to preboard to wipe down the seat (even though they acknowledge that with current cleaning procedures, traces of allergens may remain). In 2018 American Airlines was reprimanded by the government after failing to comply with legislation regarding preboarding (Gagné, 2018). However, some customers have reported to have had exceptionally helpful crew members willing to make any and all accommodations. Additionally, about 900 American Airlines planes carry Auvi-Q on board (Smith, 2019).

Delta Airlines: Delta is relatively helpful and accommodating. They do not serve peanuts by request of the passenger 48 hours in advance, but all other allergens will be served. If your allergy is minor enough that you feel comfortable eating meals on the plane, they have a list of meals with their ingredients on their website, and you can order your meal in advance. They will allow you to preboard to wipe down your seat if you notify them 48 hours in advance and bring your own cleaning supplies. Team members have reported that their procedures and policies are relatively strong, but the older planes themselves are not well sanitized. They have many large brand snacks that have little cross contact and many options for people with various allergies. In some cases, flight attendants have been willing to heat up food for food allergy sufferers on long flights. The crews are normally kind and accommodating.

Southwest Airlines: Southwest will not carry peanuts on your flight if you notify the airline of your peanut allergy in advance (this only applies to peanut allergies). Furthermore, they let you preboard to wipe down your seat and will make a courtesy announcement. They carry large brand snacks and generally have kind flight crew members. They understand the severity of allergies and are willing to work with food allergy sufferers.

United Airlines: United's flight crew has a history of being unwilling to accommodate passengers. Their website offers disclaimers and a list of what they cannot do: create a buffer zone, tell passengers to not eat your allergen, guarantee a clean area, and serve snacks without allergens in them. Additionally, even in light of "improved" cleaning procedures, their planes are dirty, suggesting that there could be a presence of many allergens (Larosa, 2020). Overall, their policies, or lack thereof, and their flight crews' apathy makes United risky for food allergy sufferers.

Alaska Airlines: Alaska Airlines guarantees that you can wipe down your seat. As long as the crew is knowledgeable and cooperative, Alaska Airlines has some of the best accommodations for passengers with food allergies. They are willing to move passengers around you to new seats if they are eating your allergen, and let you bring your own food on board. They also have Auvi-Q on board, which makes them one of only 3 airlines on this list to do so (Smith, 2019). However, there have been instances where the crew did not abide by these policies, which led to removal of passengers from the flight and allergic reactions (Woodrow, 2019). Alaska Airlines' disability services representative assured our team that these were isolated instances that were specific to an unacceptably poor flight crew.

JetBlue: JetBlue's customer service agent was the most knowledgeable out of all the airlines. He was able to inform us that every flight crew is trained in using the epipen, provide a full snack menu (which contained national brands with options free of top 9 allergens), that they encourage that passengers call in advance to inform the airline of your allergy, and that the crew will create a buffer zone regardless of protest from other passengers.

Frontier Airlines: Frontier explicitly states that they cannot guarantee an allergen friendly environment. Other than that, they provide limited information. They tell passengers to "fly at your own risk". However, passengers are allowed to board early and wipe down their areas and the crew will make a courtesy announcement (but will not enforce their request for others to refrain from eating the allergens).

Spirit Airlines: Spirit provides contradictory information. They will create a buffer zone, but they strongly urge you to consult a physician before flying as your allergen can still be present. Some stories about Spirit have been glowing endorsements from the food allergy community, and the others have said that

flying on Spirit with food allergies was a terrible and life threatening experience (Frames, 2016, No Nut Traveler). All in all, there is no consistency with Spirit.

Based on the above information, the team has decided that these are the best and worst domestic airlines. Please remember: it is the nature of flying that in each of these cases there could be an uncharacteristically rude flight crew or accommodating flight crew. These rankings are based off of the average flyer experience, not the exceptions:

Worst domestic airlines:

1. American Airlines
2. Frontier Airlines
3. United Airlines

Best domestic airlines:

1. JetBlue
2. Alaska Airlines
3. Delta Airlines
4. Southwest Airlines

Moving onto international airlines. These are riskier for food allergy sufferers as the U.S. law that prohibits airlines from forcing a passenger to leave a flight because of allergies does not apply.

Part of what inspired this project was learning about international airlines that treated food allergy sufferers poorly. We asked some of these airlines about these occurrences. Before we give the profiles of the best and worst international airlines, here are these airlines responses to our questions:

Emirates: There were many reported issues with Emirates, mainly regarding apathetic flight attendants. They prohibited passengers from flying due to their allergies and in one instance told a passenger to “hold up in the toilet” while the people on the flight ate snacks (Craven-Todd, 2018). However, we were assured that they do not do this anymore, regardless of whether you call 72 hours (their suggestion) in advance or not. The flight crew will allow you to wipe down your seats, and they will heat up any food you bring. They cannot guarantee that there is no cross contact.

Qantas: There are many stories of passengers being mistreated because of their allergies on Qantas flights, the most absurd being a passenger was forced by the crew to hide in the bathroom so that other passengers could eat almonds (Godfrey, 2019). However, their entire crew is trained in using the epipen, and

their meals can be allergy friendly even for those with the most severe allergies. One of our TAG members reported a great experience with an accommodating flight crew and wonderful, simple meals. Once again, it seems that it depends on the flight crew, and that calling in advance is key.

Singapore Airlines: Since a three year-old had an anaphylactic reaction to peanuts on a seven hour flight, Singapore Airlines has made vast changes (BBC, 2017). Now, they do not serve peanuts and have numerous snacks completely free of the top 9 allergens. Furthermore, as long as you call 48 hours in advance, they will allow you to preboard to wipe down your area and make meals free of your allergen (although cross contact is still a possibility). They prohibit flight attendants to remove a food allergy sufferer from a flight because of allergies.

Air France: AirFrance had the trifecta of food allergy wrongdoing; passengers have had ingestion and airborne reactions, they kicked a family off a flight because one of the members had a peanut allergy, and the flight crew was insensitive and untrained in all these instances (Rabin, 2017). However, they now have one of the most thorough food allergy policies, detailing what foods meals do not contain and in what quantity. However, they have not addressed the insensitivity of their crew and cross contact is still possible in their meals.

Now, here are the rankings for international airlines with evaluations:

Worst international:

1. Aerolineas Argentinas

- Aerolineas Argentinas' website offers no information about food allergies at all. This is a red flag. Additionally, there have been numerous negative reports, including a woman getting thrown off a flight for having a peanut allergy (Tingle, 2019). They follow none of our "best practices" and thus earned the distinction of being the worst international airline for food allergy sufferers.

2. Iberia Airlines

- Iberia Airlines offers only disclaimers, the flight crew is reportedly rude to those with allergies, and they did not respond to our request for information. One child passenger was told to "stop being hysterical" when she suffered an allergic reaction due to a surface that had not been properly cleaned. Another passenger reports that the crew would not make a courtesy announcement that there was a passenger on board with a nut allergy (White, 2018). One of our TAG members said that she "did not feel comfortable... [she] was suggested other food options and the severity wasn't really understood by the cabin crew. [She] felt really uncomfortable the whole flight because [her] allergens were everywhere." The only

reason they ranked better than Aerolineas Argentinas is that they do understand that allergies exist and offer alternate meals for people with minor allergies.

3. AirChina

- AirChina can prepare meals that are safe for those with minor food allergies, but that is the only food allergy safety best practice they follow. They will not allow you to preboard to wipe down seats, they serve food with all nuts (and other allergens as well) and reportedly have unclean surfaces (Tripadvisor, 2018).

Best International:

1. Swiss Airlines

- As long as you call in advance to inform Swiss Airlines of your allergies, they will take a variety precautions on your behalf: requesting that other passengers do not bring snacks with your allergen, not serving snacks with nuts (only nuts), and if you call 5 days in advance, they can make you an allergen free meal. They also have a variety of large-brand packaged snacks. In addition, the flight attendants are trained to administer the epi-pen and know to recognize signs of an allergic reaction.

2. KLM

- KLM carries a large variety of packaged snacks free of top 9 allergens. They have no nut products (except in snacks on intercontinental flights). Flight attendants always hand out wipes after serving snacks and recommend that everyone wipe down their surrounding area. Their website is one of the most detailed of all that were studied, and clearly want their passengers with allergies to feel safe. Once again, calling them in advance to alert them of your allergies is suggested.

3. British Airlines

- If you call 48 hours in advance, British Airlines will make arrangements for your food. They allow you to preboard and allow you to carry your own food in addition to the top-9 free snacks they have. Their crew is reported to be always compassionate and helpful.

4. ANA

- Although they did not respond to our outreach, ANA's policies and reviews are promising. They have a special seat cleaning service and a wide variety of snacks. In addition, for those who can eat meals with cross contact, they have two meal options for those with allergies, the first being a "7 allergen-free meal", which does not contain any of seven major allergens (wheat, buckwheat, dairy

products, eggs, peanuts, shrimp, and crab). The other meal is called the "27 allergen-friendly meal" and is free of the 7 major allergen ingredients listed above as well as 20 others (abalone, squid, salmon roe, orange, kiwi, beef, walnut, salmon, mackerel, soybean, poultry, banana, pork, matsutake mushroom, peach, yam, apple, gelatin, sesame, and cashew nuts). Despite the cross contact warning in these meals, the flight crew and airline in general is cognizant of food allergies and prepared to make any necessary accommodations.

We hope that these rankings help you and your family when planning your next trip. Be safe and have fun!

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