

In Japan, some public bathrooms post an icon showing that they have facilities for people with ostomies. But in most of our uncivilized world, this is a fantasy. In fact, you might get an occasional glare or unpleasant remark when you emerge from a handicapped stall in a public bathroom, because you appear able-bodied. How to handle that is of course up to you, but it may help to have a response ready. Some people explain they have an ostomy, or an invisible handicap. Some feel they don't owe an explanation to anybody. And others seize the opportunity to jump on their soapboxes and loudly proclaim their rights. Your call.

My daughter (a non-ostomate) is wheelchair-bound. She's often had to suffer in pain to reach a handicapped bathroom, only to find it occupied by a seemingly able-bodied person who just wanted more room to put down shopping bags or try on new clothes. But my daughter knows there are people like me too, without a visible handicap, who actually need the facilities. So she doesn't jump to conclusions. A little tolerance on both sides goes a long way.

If you spring a leak, you need to move swiftly. I like to scout out public places where I go frequently, and locate the best bathrooms. For instance, in my hospital there are several bathrooms with a handicapped stall, but also a couple of stand-alone, unisex, full bathrooms, complete with a sink. Almost as good as home! I keep a treasure map in my head, showing the locations of these hidden gems.

Back to work

Returning to work with an ostomy presents a few unique challenges. Here are some tips that can help make it easier.

Check with your doctor – Get a medical all-clear from your doctor or stoma nurse. How soon you can return to work depends very much on the kind of work you do. If it involves heavy lifting, for example, you may need to wait longer or actually change your duties. It might be recommended that you return gradually – maybe fewer hours or days per week at first. Or perhaps you could tele-commute for a while.

Advance planning – Take the time to carefully consider how your ostomy might affect you at work. Think about everything, from uniforms to toilet facilities. This way you can problem-solve in advance and be prepared with practical solutions.

To tell or not to tell? – Whoever you report to should be aware you have an ostomy. Explain what impact, if any, this might have on your day-to-day work and offer your solutions to situations that might arise. For example, if you're an air traffic controller or a server in a restaurant, you can't just suddenly nip off to empty your pouch without calling in a temporary replacement. Those arrangements and any others specific to your particular job need to be worked out with your employer before you return. So you should tell at least that one person. What, if anything, you choose to tell any other co-workers about your ostomy is entirely up to you and your comfort level.

Be prepared – Keep a fully-stocked emergency kit at your workplace. Personally, I'd keep at least a week's worth of supplies on hand, including several resealable plastic bags and odor control bags, so I wouldn't have to replenish the kit daily or risk being caught short. Many folks leave a change of clothes at work too, for peace of mind.

Using the facilities – Your workplace might have a stand-alone bathroom, like at home, or a communal one with cubicles. If you'll require a private sink occasionally or even with every change, and the facilities are communal, you may need to make other arrangements. Perhaps there's a private bathroom for higher-ups that you could seek permission to use.

One of your primary concerns will probably be about smells. See the *Smells* section of Chapter 7 for tips on how to reduce odors in your bag, in the toilet, and in the air.

Leaving used pouches or appliances in a trash receptacle in a common area, even if they're well bagged, is probably not the best plan. Instead, seal them well (e.g., in a resealable plastic bag, inside an odor control bag) and keep

them in your personal space, like in a drawer or locker, until you can take them home and dispose of them there.

If you feel awkward carrying a little trash bag and emergency kit in and out of the bathroom, you could always keep them in an attractive shoe bag or leather satchel of some kind. That way, you could stop and chat with co-workers en route without feeling uncomfortable. You might even develop an aura of mystique. For all they know, there are closely guarded national secrets in there, or a flask of gin. LOL. If they only knew!

Noises – Everyone “breaks wind” sometimes. The only difference is whether the sound comes from behind or in front of them. Either way, it can be embarrassing, particularly in a work situation.

It can help to avoid foods that produce gas (see *Food Tables*, Appendix A), and you can wear an ostomy band or belly wrap, or even a stoma guard, to help muffle the sounds. But you can never guarantee that your stoma won't suddenly speak up in public.

Lisa Goodman-Helfand, a gifted author and professional speaker on healthcare issues (www.comfortableinmythickskin.com), admits that her stoma “... can produce flatulent noises that are very difficult to ignore for even the most polite adult. Other times, my stoma generates loud gurgling noises akin to a drain that's just been unclogged. When these embarrassing sounds escape, I have a menu of canned responses I can select from:

Option #1 (tell a lie): “Oh, excuse me, my stomach is growling, I forgot to eat breakfast this morning.” This is typically met with a weak smile that's betraying the person's body language which reads: Uh-huh, sure.

Option #2 (tell the truth): “Sorry, my stomach makes weird noises because I don't have a colon. The good news is, I'm not really farting, so no need to anticipate a foul odor.” I only say this to people who already know about my surgery, as it would be an odd thing to say to a stranger or acquaintance and I already feel like I come off weird enough.

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.

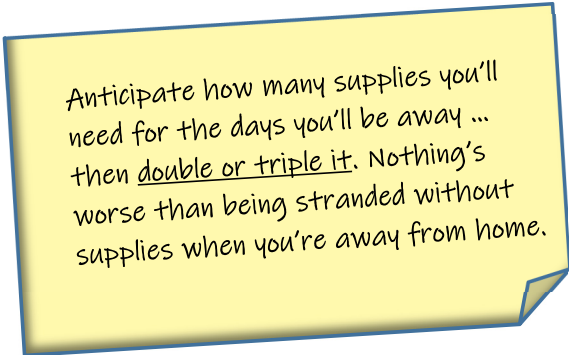
Travel

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!