

9 Moves to Make When Your Flight Is Canceled

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On Monday, nearly 6,000 flights have been cancelled. That means hundreds of thousands of potentially stranded passengers. Will you know what to do if it happens to you?

First thing to know: What do airlines owe travelers when they cancel a flight? You're not going to like the answer: Nothing. But they will make an effort to book you on the next available flight at no extra cost. That's the case whether you're stranded midway through your trip or are about to embark.

Watch Money Talks News money expert Stacy Johnson explain the rules in this video. Then read about nine ways to cope with a cancellation.

The federal site USA.gov says:

If your flight is canceled, most airlines will rebook you on the earliest flight possible to your destination, at no additional charge. If you're able to find a flight on another airline, ask the first airline to endorse your ticket to the new carrier. This could save you a fare increase, but there is no rule requiring them to do this.

Airlines do have incentive to help you. Says USA Today:

Your airline ticket represents a contract between you and the airline; therefore, standard contract rules apply, leaving airlines open to a potential lawsuit if they don't make reasonable efforts to fulfill their side of the bargain. For that reason – and to keep customers happy – most airlines will try to rebook you as soon as possible, as space and weather permit.

However, some federal rules do apply. The U.S. Department of Transportation explains, "If your flight is canceled or diverted or experiences a lengthy delay, and you choose to cancel your trip as a result, you are entitled to a refund for the unused transportation — even for nonrefundable tickets — and for any bag fee that you paid."

Airline policies

Each airline has a policy on cancellations. ABC News offers links to cancellation policies for larger airlines, including those of American Airlines, JetBlue, United, US Airways and Spirit.

When the weather is really bad, airlines often offer passengers more options. Says ABC News:

In the case of bad weather, airlines issue flexible policies that allow travelers to take their trips at a later date. These policies also waive change fees, even on the lowest-priced, most restrictive tickets.

Delta, for example, promised to refund the cost of tickets for canceled flights during last January's storm. It also offered passengers whose flights weren't canceled a free, one-time ticket change if they were traveling to one of the East Coast destinations most affected by the storm.

JetBlue, criticized for closing nearly its entire operation in Boston and New York for a short stretch last year, promised \$50 credits or 5,000 frequent-flier miles for each canceled flight to an estimated 150,000 affected travelers, according to the Hartford Business Journal. It also pledged to "review compensating stranded customers for their out-of-pocket expenses."

The days of freebies may be over

If your flight is canceled because of weather, you can ask for meal and hotel vouchers, but don't get your hopes up.

Travelers' experiences vary. Money Talks News editor Karen Datko said she was once on a flight to Philadelphia that was forced to land in Pittsburgh because of thunderstorms. The airline provided hotel vouchers to many stranded travelers on the flight, then hired a bus to drive others to Philly at no extra cost.

But Frank Zurline, owner of Bellingham Travel & Cruise in Bellingham, Wash., said the days when airlines shelled out such goodies are pretty much over. "Believe me, when they start charging you for everything, it's a nickel-and-dime industry," he said in an interview.

Airlines may dole out food and hotel vouchers at their discretion, but that's usually when the carrier is at fault, not for cancellations because of weather. Travel expert Mark Murphy with Travel Alliance told us:

If it's weather, they don't have to pay you for your hotel or anything else. On the other hand, if it's a mechanical or another issue, there may be more flexibility for you as a consumer to negotiate.

One exception: valued customers

There's an exception: If you're a valued frequent traveler, you're likely to get better treatment. That happened to Murphy once when faced with a flight cancellation on a business trip.

His carrier, US Airways, offered a seat on its next available flight to his destination. But it was the following day, too late to make his meeting. He says he approached airline representatives pleasantly and pointed out that he'd flown with the airline 66 times that year. Could they please help him out? They found him a seat on another airline that same day.

To be fair, he says, feeding and lodging the tens of thousands of travelers stranded in events like last year's would have been prohibitively expensive for the airlines.

9 tips for coping with cancellations

You can take steps to reduce the inconvenience and stress of flight cancellations.

Buy tickets from a travel agent. You'll pay a small fee, perhaps \$20 or \$30. But a good agent watches your itinerary and, if your connection is canceled, re-books you on another flight while you're in the air, Murphy says. You can waltz off the plane and onto your next flight while your fellow passengers scramble to find new accommodations.

Consider trip insurance. But be realistic about the coverage. For example, American Airlines says on its website:

Trip cancellation coverage will only refund prepaid, nonrefundable payments if you have to cancel for an unexpected covered reason. Covered reasons may include sudden medical emergencies, death of a family member or traveling companion, certain terrorist acts, being called for jury duty, or bad weather that completely shuts down your common carrier.

Get early warnings. Download your airline's app onto your phone and sign up for flight alerts. Be sure the airline has your phone number and email address. Keep an eye on Flight Aware while traveling to learn immediately if your flight's been grounded. The sooner you learn of trouble, the faster you can act.

Get re-booked. Line up at the customer service counter and, at the same time, call the airline's toll-free number. Try getting re-booked to fly out on your current airline or another. If you find a flight on another airline, ask your first carrier to endorse your ticket to the new airline.

Stay open to alternatives. When re-booking, try other airports or other cities near your destination. Try Amtrak, buses and even car rentals. (Before renting a car, ask about drop fees and mileage charges for one-way trips.)

Mind your P's and Q's. When asking overwhelmed airline personnel for help, remember that they didn't cause the problem. Try to be gracious, if for no other reason than it'll get you further.

Buy a one-day pass. If you're stuck in an airport and you don't belong to your airline's frequent-flier club, purchase a day pass for about \$50. You get entry to a comfortable lounge and use of the loyalty program's hotline, advises The Associated Press. The main benefit, though, is that members get better, quicker access to help from airline personnel in the lounge.

Travel in Europe. European Union laws are more generous than those in the U.S., says USA Today. Your airline must provide meals and "a hotel stay when the cancellation results in an overnight layover and a full reimbursement when the cancellation delays the passenger for five hours or more."

Crucial last words. Don't leave home with a maxed-out credit card.

<http://www.msn.com/en-us/money/personalfinance/9-moves-to-make-when-your-flight-is-canceled/ar-AA8Bqd4>