

Knees Set Off Airport Security

How one traveler learns – the hard way – to navigate TSA screening.



GRR – that’s both the code for the airport in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and how I feel about it.

The lines are long at 6:30 a.m. – and I’m stuck in one because the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) doesn’t open its Precheck line until 9 a.m. I paid \$90 for five years of Precheck, but here I am, along with my two artificial knees – \$140,000 worth of hardware confusing both the security scanner and the TSA staffer who can’t figure out what I’m telling her.

“You set off the machine,” she says. “Do you have change in your pockets?”

“I have neither pockets nor change,” I say, as my purse, laptop, shoes, jacket and briefcase pile up on the conveyer belt. “I have two replacement knees,” I say. She frowns.

“Fake knee joints. Prosthetic knees,” I explain.

“A prosthetic? You have to take it off,” she says.

“I can’t. They’re inside my legs.” I point at my knees. “Surgery. They’re metal knee joints. Inside me.”

“You’ll have to take off your prosthetics so we can examine them,” she says, motioning me to the side. GRR...

Another day at the airport, another discussion with a TSA manager. Every year, 600,000 prosthetic joints are hammered into the knees of Americans, according to the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. Surely I’m not the first flyer to set off the scanner. So why the confusion? Because I don’t speak TSA. I should not have used the term “prosthetic.”

TSA staff are trained to detect weapons and threats, but they’re not accustomed to medical jargon. I tried “artificial joint” at both the San Francisco and Denver airports and the TSA staff nodded and waved me through like traffic cops at rush hour.

“Internal or external medical device – that’s all we need to know,” says Joanna Torres, a TSA passenger support specialist at Chicago’s O’Hare airport. “Don’t over-explain it,” she says. “Just tell us enough so that we can get you to the right machine.” —JOANNE CLEAVER

CHECKPOINT TIPS

TSA experts offer this advice for travelers with implants:

- » Print and fill out a disability notification card from the TSA website (tsa.gov) to show officers. It won’t guarantee easy passage, but it can help with communication.
- » Instead of going through metal-detecting scanners, where a metal replacement joint sets off alarms, ask to go through the body scanner, or “advanced image technology” (AIT).
- » Even with AIT, your implants might trigger a pat-down. Ask for a private screening, because the agents must take your belongings with you to the screening area so you won’t be separated from them – a courtesy not always extended if you just step aside.



Get tips to ease the pain of traveling @ arthritis.org/ATtraveltips.