

Accommodations on Board: Are They a Moral Obligation?

An airplane is fully boarded and preparing to take a long-haul flight, but one passenger suddenly notifies the cabin crew of his severe peanut allergy. He requests an accommodation for this allergy, which would require all other passengers to abstain from eating or exposing peanuts to the air circulation system for the full duration of the flight. The other passengers oppose this accommodation, and the cabin crew is torn regarding who should take priority in this situation.

Some may prioritize the allergic passenger's health, viewing the situation as a person's health versus a minor inconvenience to others. If the airline chooses to accommodate the passenger with severe allergies that person is guaranteed a safe flight while the other passengers are simply unable to eat peanuts during the flight. Ideally, all passengers should be entitled to a safe, accessible way to fly, especially when flying is the most efficient and easiest means of long-distance travel. Failing to accommodate the medical needs of someone in this situation would strip them of this entitlement to safety as alternative travel arrangements may not be possible, thus forcing them to brave the flight. Additionally, some may argue that not accommodating a passenger's allergies actually poses more burdens to other passengers, as allergy-induced medical emergencies may cause an emergency landing.

Alternatively, some may argue that passengers have the right to enjoy their own food and amenities regardless of passengers' requests for accommodation. This may seem selfish at first, but if the passenger is required to accommodate another's allergy, the requirement might contradict the entitlements the passenger expects from information given while booking the flight. Furthermore, it is not the responsibility or burden of others to accommodate the passenger at such short notice. In this situation, the passenger had the option of notifying the airline of their allergy (who would notify the other passengers) beforehand to ensure others would not have to change plans but did not take that option. For example, in other settings like schools, allergies and medical needs are taken note of and notified to all community members ahead of time. This period of time allows for members to prepare to adapt to the accommodation or raise any concerns they may have. By deciding to not notify others of their allergy beforehand, the responsibility of not triggering a peanut allergy is in the hands of the passenger themselves, not others.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it reasonable for an airline to implement a guideline to accommodate allergies? If so, should this guideline include solely clinical evidence or social norms?
2. How far can these accommodations go in different situations? For example, would it be reasonable for a parent to request other passengers abstain from watching non age-appropriate media due to having a small child in the area?
3. What if there are multiple people asking for the same accommodation or for conflicting accommodations? How should we resolve conflicting needs on airplanes?

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