

Can You Switch Seats on a Flight?

(Courtesy of Caroline Morse Teel, SmarterTravel)

If you're stuck in a middle seat, spotting a row that remains empty after the cabin doors are closed can feel like winning the lottery. However, before you lunge for that unoccupied seat, there are a few things you should know about switching seats on a flight.

[Bobby Laurie](#), a former flight attendant, recommends always checking with a flight attendant before changing your seat. "They'll usually tell you if, when and where it's okay to move," says Laurie. It's also important that flight attendants have the correct seating arrangements on their manifest in case of an emergency, so always let one know if you do move seats.

Why You Might Not Be Able to Switch Seats

You probably know better than trying to sneak up to business class from your economy seat (that's definitely not going to fly) but there are also some seats in the economy cabin that cost extra. "Some airlines designate the first few rows of the plane, and usually the overwing exits, as premium or preferred seats," warns Laurie. "They always come with an extra fee and flight attendants are supposed to check the manifest against any passengers seated in those seats." If you haven't paid for the privilege of an extra legroom seat, you might get kicked out if you swap to one.

Oguzhan Dursun / Adobe Stock

Switching seats can be a safety concern as well. On smaller regional airplanes with around 50-70 seats or on larger aircrafts during a period of high wind, where passengers are seated is important. In these instances, says Laurie, "The flight attendants have to provide the pilots with a passenger count in each section of the airplane. These numbers are used to calculate the weight and balance of the airplane before takeoff. If a few passengers were to move after the count was completed into/out of a particular zone it may cause issues with the calculations the flight deck has completed."

Seat Swapping Etiquette

Empty seats are fair game (after you've checked with the flight attendant), but asking a fellow passenger to swap seats can be trickier. If you're looking to change seats so that you can sit with your traveling companions, never ask someone to swap into a worse seat—for instance, don't ask someone with a window seat to move to your middle seat. Be polite with your request, and never pressure someone to move—they may have paid extra to select their seat ahead of time and it's completely fair if they don't want to swap. You're likely to have a more successful outcome if you offer a better seat in a swap—for example, asking someone in a seat in the back of the plane to switch to your seat closer to the front.