

Can You Travel with Cannabis at Denver International Airport?

Cannabis Prohibited at Denver International Airport Despite Colorado's Legalization Laws

Cannabis has been legal for medical use in Colorado since 2000 and for recreational use since 2012 for those aged 21 and over. However, despite the state's progressive stance on cannabis, Denver International Airport (DIA) strictly prohibits marijuana. This article will provide a detailed explanation of the policies regarding marijuana at DIA and the reasons behind them, along with useful tips for those flying with medication.

Denver International Airport Prohibits Cannabis

The question many travelers ask when arriving at Denver International Airport is whether they are allowed to carry or smoke marijuana on airport property. The answer is a straightforward and firm "no." Although cannabis is legal for both medical and recreational use in Colorado, it remains classified as a Schedule I drug under federal law, specifically the Controlled Substances Act. This means that marijuana is prohibited at DIA, both in checked baggage and carry-on luggage.

The distinction between state and federal law is the key issue here. While the state of Colorado allows for the possession and use of marijuana, federal authorities such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) maintain jurisdiction over airports. As a result, marijuana is forbidden in all areas controlled by the TSA at DIA, even though some other Colorado airports may allow public possession of marijuana outside of security checkpoints.

Cannabis at the Airport: State vs. Federal Law

Marijuana's legal status in Colorado does not extend to federally regulated zones, which include airport security areas. On the City of Denver's FAQ webpage, the answer to whether marijuana can be taken through airport security or out of state is clear: "No. It is illegal to take marijuana across state lines. Denver International Airport prohibits marijuana on its property."

Passengers flying out of DIA are prohibited from:

- Leaving the state with marijuana
- Bringing marijuana into the airport, whether in checked luggage or carry-on bags
- Possessing marijuana in any federal jurisdiction, including TSA screening areas

Possession and Public Use in Airports

In some airports across Colorado, passengers may be allowed to possess marijuana in public areas not controlled by federal authorities. However, DIA has taken a strict approach, banning all marijuana possession

and use anywhere on its property. This is because federal law supersedes state law in federally regulated environments such as airports.

Furthermore, while consuming marijuana before arriving at the airport is not illegal, travelers should exercise caution. The discretion of airport staff or flight crew can result in denied boarding if they believe a passenger is intoxicated or impaired.

TSA Policy on Cannabis: What Travelers Should Know

The TSA's primary mission is to ensure security and safety at the airport, not to enforce drug laws. As stated by the Colorado Sun, TSA officers "do not search for marijuana or other illegal drugs." However, if marijuana is discovered during routine security screening, the TSA will notify local law enforcement authorities, and it is up to them to decide the next steps. In Colorado, where marijuana is legal, this might not lead to arrest, but travelers should be aware that federal law governs airport property.

This rule applies even to medical marijuana. Passengers who carry medicinal cannabis must still adhere to federal law, meaning they cannot bring it through security at DIA.

Flying Internationally with Cannabis: Strict Regulations

For those traveling internationally, the situation becomes even more complicated. Different countries have varying regulations regarding marijuana, and many treat cannabis possession as a serious offense, even for medical purposes. Therefore, it is essential to research the destination country's laws before traveling, as carrying marijuana abroad can result in severe penalties.

Cannabis Remains a Federal Schedule I Drug

Though cannabis is legal in 38 states for medical use and in a growing number of states for recreational use, it remains classified as a Schedule I drug under federal law. This places it alongside substances such as heroin, LSD, and ecstasy—drugs that are considered to have a high potential for abuse and no accepted medical use in the United States at the federal level.

In May 2024, the Associated Press reported that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is considering reclassifying marijuana as a Schedule III drug, which would make it less restrictive. However, as of September 2024, marijuana remains a Schedule I substance, meaning it is still prohibited in federal jurisdictions such as airports.

Understanding FAA Regulations for Pilots and Passengers

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has taken a firm stance on the issue of marijuana in aviation. The FAA strictly forbids pilots from knowingly carrying marijuana aboard their aircraft, even in states where it is legal. The agency has issued warnings to pilots, reiterating that federal law prohibits the transportation of marijuana on any aircraft, regardless of state laws.

FAA penalties for violating these laws are severe. Pilots caught transporting marijuana face the permanent revocation of their pilot certificates. Furthermore, aircraft owners risk having their aircraft registrations revoked for up to five years if their planes are used to transport marijuana. This rule applies to all forms of marijuana, including edibles and other products.

Cannabis Confusion: Contradictions Between State and Federal Law

The contradictory nature of cannabis legalization in the United States has caused confusion for many travelers. While Colorado has legalized marijuana for both medical and recreational use, federal law still governs airports like DIA. This has created a patchwork of regulations, where what is legal outside the airport suddenly becomes illegal once a traveler steps onto federal property.

It is also important to note that the FAA's ban on marijuana extends beyond pilots and includes passengers flying on commercial aircraft. Despite marijuana's legal status in several states, the FAA enforces strict penalties for any attempt to transport cannabis via aircraft.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) Limits at TSA Checkpoints

The TSA does allow passengers to carry certain cannabis products that contain less than 0.3% THC, which is the psychoactive compound found in marijuana. However, this rule applies only to specific cannabidiol (CBD) products that are derived from hemp, not marijuana. These products must meet strict federal guidelines, and travelers should always double-check the content and legality of any cannabis product they plan to bring through TSA security.

Key Takeaways for Passengers Flying Out of DIA

- Cannabis is prohibited at Denver International Airport, regardless of whether it is for medical or recreational use.
- While TSA officers do not actively search for cannabis, they are required to report any findings to local law enforcement.
- Passengers should avoid carrying cannabis through airport security checkpoints, even in states where it is legal.
- The FAA strictly prohibits the transport of cannabis on any aircraft, and violations can lead to severe penalties.
- International travelers must carefully research the cannabis laws of their destination countries to avoid legal issues.

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