Sky Stuck

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR U.S. TRAVELERS

Flight disruption rights, at a glance

A delay or cancellation is stressful enough. Use these steps to understand your options and ask the airline clear questions.

1. **Keep a record**
   Save airline messages and schedule screenshots. Note the stated reason, times, and actual arrival. Keep boarding passes and receipts.
2. **Ask what is offered**
   Ask about the cause, next available flight, and meals or a hotel. Check your airline's current DOT dashboard commitments.
3. **Choose before accepting**
   If you may prefer a refund, understand the option before accepting a changed flight, rebooking, voucher, or other offer.

When a ticket refund may apply

If the airline cancels your flight, you can choose a refund instead of traveling or accepting an alternative. A refund may also apply if you decline a significantly changed flight.

> A significant change includes arriving **3 or more hours late on a domestic trip** or **6 or more hours late on an international trip**, leaving that much earlier, changing airports, or adding a connection.

If you do not want to travel, decline the rebooking; accepting it usually means no ticket refund under this rule. When a refund is due, the airline must send it automatically to the original form of payment within 7 business days for a card purchase or 20 calendar days for other payment methods.

Meals, hotels and rebooking

U.S. airline commitments differ. The DOT dashboard lists what each airline commits to provide for disruptions within its control. Meals, hotel stays, and alternate-airline rebooking are not guaranteed for every delay or cause.

A long U.S. delay by itself does not guarantee cash compensation. A refund may still apply if you choose not to travel after a cancellation or qualifying significant change.

Check the DOT airline dashboard

Other protections to know

Involuntary bumping: If an oversold flight bumps you involuntarily, compensation may be required. Eligibility and amount depend on the circumstances. Volunteering is different; ask for the terms before agreeing.

Delayed checked bag: File a mishandled-baggage report if your bag does not arrive. A fee refund may be due if it is not delivered within 12 hours of a domestic arrival; 15 hours for an international flight segment up to 12 hours, or 30 hours for a longer segment.

Held on the aircraft: At a U.S. airport, airlines must offer a snack and drinking water within 2 hours. They generally must provide a chance to get off before 3 hours (domestic) or 4 hours (international), with limited safety, security, or air-traffic exceptions. Wait for the crew's direction.

Official sources

Checked against U.S. DOT guidance on November 27, 2026. This covers U.S. rules; other laws may apply on international routes. Rules and airline commitments can change. General information, not legal advice.

DOT: Refunds
DOT: Fly Rights
DOT: Airline delay dashboard
DOT: Tarmac delays