

Care in the Air



Frequency of travel by air and the duration of flights have increased substantially in recent years. Air travel, in particular over long distances may expose passengers to a number of factors that can impact on their general state of health and wellbeing.

Most health risks associated with travel by air can be reduced by careful planning and by taking some simple precautions before, during and after the flight.

Pre Travel Risk Assessment:

All travellers should consult their doctor or practice nurse for a health risk assessment prior to travel. Make sure you allow plenty of time, book an appointment at least 6-8 weeks before your planned travel date.

Certain health risks associated with flying may be increased in travellers with pre-existing health conditions.

Circulatory Problems and Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is a serious condition where a clot of blood or thrombus develops in the deep veins, usually in the lower leg. DVT can occur following long periods of immobility for example following surgery, but occasionally can occur spontaneously in healthy people.

There is some evidence that long-haul flights increase the risk of developing DVT, especially when passengers have little or no exercise. The World Health Organisation (WHO) advise that the risk approximately doubles following flights of 4 hours or more, however the overall risk remains low, at 1 case per 6,000 healthy individual. There are ways that you can reduce the risk of DVT on such flights and also on other journeys which involve prolonged periods of immobility such as long journeys by car, rail or coach.

Before you go:

You may be at higher risk of developing deep vein thrombosis (DVT) if:

- You or a member of your family has suffered from blood clots.
- You have a condition affecting the clotting of the blood.
- You are suffering from or have recently been treated for cancer (malignancy)
- You are overweight (obese)
- You have a certain type of heart disease e.g. congestive cardiac failure or recent myocardial infarct (heart attack).
- You have had surgery lasting more than 30 minutes within the last 1- 2 months
- You are pregnant or have recently had a baby within 6 weeks

- You are taking hormones such as oral contraceptives or Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT).
- You have a lower limb fracture in plaster.
- You are dehydrated

If any of these apply to you, speak to your doctor or nurse who may be able to advise you on other precautions such as the use of elastic stockings or, in those at high risk, the use of blood-thinning drugs.

During the trip:

- Be comfortable in your seat.
- Avoid stowing hand luggage under your seat where it restricts movement of the legs and feet.
- Do not wear restrictive clothing particularly around your waist or lower extremities.
- Wear properly fitting flight socks
- Move around the cabin as much as is practicable and safe, particularly during long haul flights. A regular trip to the bathroom every 2-3 hours is a reasonable measure.
- Regularly bend and straighten your legs, feet and ankles while seated during your flight, this will encourage blood flow from the lower legs.
- Take regular deep breaths
- Avoid taking sleeping pills, which can also cause immobility.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Be sensible about alcohol consumption, excessive alcohol can lead to dehydration.

The use of aspirin is **NOT** recommended. In view of the risk of side effects and the absence of any clear benefit UK guidelines advise that aspirin should not be used for the prevention of DVT in travellers.

After your trip:

Contact a doctor urgently if you experience symptoms of DVT on arrival. Symptoms may include pain, warmth, swelling and skin discolouration (redness) in the leg/calf and/or breathing difficulties.

Cabin Air Pressure:

Reduced Oxygen levels: During flight, reduced cabin air pressure results in less oxygen being taken up by the blood. This is normally well tolerated by healthy passengers. However travellers with heart and lung disease and blood disorders such as anaemia (in particular sickle-cell anaemia) may not tolerate this reduced oxygen level very well. Arrangements may be made with the airline for the provision of additional oxygen supply during the flight if required.

Ear Popping: During descent of the aircraft an increase in cabin pressure may cause your ears or sinuses to feel blocked (often described as a popping sensation) this can result in pain and discomfort.

- Yawning, chewing or swallowing will help to relieve the symptoms, remember to pack some boiled sweets or chewing gum in your hand luggage.
- If the problem persists a short forceful expiration against a pinched nose and closed mouth may help.
- For infants, feeding or giving a pacifier (dummy) to stimulate swallowing may reduce symptoms.

Travellers with ear, nose and sinus infections should avoid flying where possible. If travel cannot be avoided, the use of decongestant nasal drops shortly before the flight and again before descent may be helpful.

Recent Surgery: Changes in air cabin pressure may impact on your state of health during the flight. Travellers who have recently undergone surgery should seek advice from a travel health physician or their own doctor on how long they should wait before undertaking air travel.

Humidity

Humidity in aircraft cabins is usually low, this may cause skin dryness and discomfort of the eyes, nose and mouth, particularly during long haul flights. Taking a few simple precautions can help to alleviate or prevent any discomfort:

- Apply moisturiser to the skin regularly
- Use a nasal spray or eye drops to help alleviate dryness
- Prevent dry or cracked lips by applying a lip protector regularly
- Wear spectacles rather than contact lenses during the flight

Motion Sickness

If you suffer from motion (travel) sickness during air travel, request a seat in the mid-section of the aircraft where movements are less pronounced.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about taking medication to help prevent problems before the flight.

Avoid drinking alcohol during the flight and for at least 24 hours before you fly.

Jet Lag

Jet lag is a condition that occurs in travellers who cross multiple time zones during their journey e.g. when flying east to west or west to east.

Symptoms may include indigestion, disturbance of bowel function, general malaise, difficulty sleeping at night, daytime sleepiness and reduced physical and mental ability. Jet lag cannot be prevented but symptoms gradually wear off as the body adapts to the new time zone. There are a number of measures that can be taken to reduce the effects of jet lag:

- Take plenty of rest prior to your journey and relax as much as possible during the flight. Short naps can be helpful, eyeshades and ear plugs may help you to relax during the flight

- Eat small light meals, drink plenty of water and limit your alcohol consumption. Excessive consumption of alcohol can exacerbate the effects of jet lag and travel fatigue.
- Limit the amount of caffeine you consume particularly within a few hours of an expected period of sleep.
- On arrival try to get as much sleep as is normal in a 24 hour period. A minimum sleep of 4 hours is thought to be necessary to allow the body's internal clock to adjust to the new time zone. If possible, make up the total sleep time by taking naps during the day in response to feeling tired.
- We all react in different ways to time zone changes. If you have any concerns, talk to your doctor or nurse for help in formulating an effective coping strategy.

This leaflet has been prepared by Sanofi Pasteur MSD to provide general information on issues relating to healthy travel. It is not meant as an alternative to individual advice and should be used in conjunction with advice provided for you by a health care professional.

March 2012