

AIRPLANE AND EARPAIN



Regardless of being a frequent flyer or flying once in while, travelling in first class or economy, sitting in window seat or aisle, or the duration of the flight; something all air travellers have in common is ear pain. To some it is just a slight discomfort, to others it means severe pain. Usually the ears will settle soon after landing. Occasionally the symptoms may drag on.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS?

There is an imbalance in the air pressure in the middle ear and air pressure in the environment. This prevents your eardrum from vibrating as it should. Air pressure regulation is the work of a narrow passage called the eustachian tube. One end is connected to the middle ear while the other opens at the back of the nasal cavity.

When an airplane climbs or descends, the air pressure in the environment changes rapidly, and your eustachian tube often doesn't react quickly enough to equalise the pressure.

HOW DOES IT FEEL?

The symptoms may include:

- **Moderate discomfort**
- **Pain in your ear**
- **Feeling of fullness in your ear**
- **Muffled hearing**

Airplane ear can occur in one or both ears. *If airplane ear is severe or lasts longer, there may be severe pain, moderate to severe hearing loss, tinnitus, vertigo, vomiting or ear bleed.*

DOES IT HAPPEN TO EVERYONE?

The pressure change is happening to everyone, but in some people the pain or blockage is worse than others. Common risk factors include:

- A small eustachian tube, especially in infants and toddlers
- Common cold
- Sinusitis
- Allergic rhinitis
- Middle ear infection

WHAT CAN BE DONE ?



The following may help people who develop ear pain when flying.

- **Swallow as much as you can.**
- **Yawn.**
- **Chew gum.**
- **Suck on hard candy.**

The trick is to ensure that the Eustachian tubes work overtime and open more frequently to accommodate the change in air pressure.

- **Use decongestant nasal spray one hour prior to boarding or landing.**

Use nasal sprays only when you really need it because these sprays can cause more congestion.

- **Use the Valsalva maneuver.**

If you are sick with a cold or allergies, the Valsalva maneuver is not recommended, as it could cause a severe ear infection.

WHAT ELSE CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT IT?

- Avoid sleeping during ascent or descent.
- Drink lots of non-caffeine fluids to stay hydrated.
- If you are very sick with a cold, flu, allergies or congestion, you could consider changing your travel plans if possible.
- If you do have to fly when you are sick, please see your doctor before travel and start decongestant medicines as per your doctor's advice.

WHAT PRECAUTIONS CAN BE TAKEN FOR THE KIDS?

- Give them a beverage during ascents and descents to encourage frequent swallowing. Have the child sit up while drinking.
- If your child is old enough, hard candy can work wonders, for the very young, the pacifier can come in handy.
- Keep your child awake during ascent and the descent.
- See the doctor before you fly if you suspect an ear or nose infection and start medications as prescribed.

WHEN TO SEEK A MEDICAL HELP?

- **If the symptoms are severe.**
- **If the symptoms are prolonged and lasts several days since air travel.**
- **If you are prone to severe airplane ear and must fly often.**