

HEALTH TREK

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The experience of traveling by airplane has been irrevocably changed in recent years. With all these new changes, it is inevitable that health issues may seem less important. Few things can ruin a vacation faster, however, than being sick. Fortunately, by planning ahead and taking a few precautions, the chances are excellent that you will arrive at your destination healthy and ready to enjoy yourself.

Clot Busting

There are two main health issues to be aware of when traveling by airplane (jet lag is a feature of circadian rhythm disruption, not the flight itself). The first concerns the cardiovascular system. Sedentary travel, especially long flights, can be challenging for the circulatory system. The most significant concern is the potential for deep vein thrombosis (DVT), a condition where small blood clots can form in the deep veins, usually of the leg. While the linking of DVT to air travel is often called “economy class syndrome,” this is a misnomer because it does not seem to matter if you fly first class or economy class. In fact, risk factors that have nothing to do with flying such as recent cancer treatments, being pregnant, recent knee or hip surgery, circulation problems, having a history of blood clots, or being over 40 years old have a more significant impact than where you sit during the flight.

A recent paper by the Air Transport Medicine Committee of the Aerospace Medical Association suggests that the evidence linking DVT with flying is circumstantial. This is because there is not enough research to determine if the experience of being on an airplane actually causes DVT. While there are many theories concerning why flying may contribute to DVT – such as poor air quality, dehydration, excessive alcohol intake, and decrease oxygen intake – the only risk factor that is currently recognized is seated immobility.

Until more research is completed, it is reasonable

to take some precautions. Talk with your medical provider about your level of risk for DVT and the advisability of flying. Those at low risk can do the following:

- stay well hydrated, avoiding alcohol and caffeinated drinks
- avoid crossing your legs when seated
- special “flight socks” (support hose) may be useful
- do foot/leg exercises and stretch your arms and legs when possible
- wear loose fitting clothes

Cold War

The potential to contract infectious diseases, like colds and flu, is a second health concern for travelers. While many people believe that the poor circulation of air within the airplane contributes significantly to this problem, current research suggests this is not the case. However, because modern aircraft circulate only about half the air as an office building, symptoms similar to those seen in “sick building syndrome” (e.g. dizziness, lightheadedness, fatigue, and difficulty breathing) can occur.

There does seem to be a correlation between flying and the increased risk of catching a cold. An analysis of one study reported in the Journal of Environmental

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Health Research suggests an infection rate 15 times higher than usual, which would be equivalent to catching 56 colds per year! The research suggests that this high rate of infection is due to at least two factors that compromise the immune system. One is the increased contact with other people in a small space. The other has to do with the failure of the mucociliary clearance system, which consists of a thin layer of mucus kept in motion by beating cilia. This system traps viruses and bacteria and moves these invaders into the stomach to be killed by stomach acid. Various things can impair this system, however. These include dry air and dehydration (which makes the mucus too thick to move), smoking (which paralyzes and eventually destroys the cilia), and various drugs. To support your immune system, consider the following suggestions:

Since the key to assisting the mucociliary clearance system is thin mucus and moisturization of the nose, hydration is critical. Increase your intake of fluids, preferably room-temperature water or green tea. Various preservative-free saline sprays can help with moisturizing the nose or you can consider nasal moisturizing gels. A gel with the appropriate formulation can help to prevent attachment to a protein called ICAM-1, which is necessary for rhinoviruses (viruses that cause colds) to enter the body. Make sure to use only water-soluble products in the nose. Use saline-type sprays before boarding and every 2-3 hours during the flight. Likewise, use gels before boarding and every 3-4 hours during flight.

Observe health behaviors beneficial to the immune system. Get plenty of restful sleep, eat moderate amounts of healthy food, and utilize stress reduction techniques such as light to moderate exercise.

In terms of diet, avoid sugar and processed, simple carbohydrates, which suppress immune function. Garlic is known to be antimicrobial and adding yogurt (for those who can tolerate dairy) with live cultures can support healthy gastrointestinal function.

Wash your hands frequently and avoid touching those who are already ill. Physical contact is a primary way infectious agents are transmitted.

In terms of supplementation, a high potency, professional-level multivitamin is useful. For other natural medicine interventions that can support your immune system, consult your naturopathic or Chinese medicine practitioner.

As you finalize your travel planning, consider this. The cost of traveling can be cheap or expensive. Being healthy enough to bring back memorable experiences of your adventure, however, is a souvenir beyond price.