



Painful Ears And Flying

Some people experience earache when flying in a plane. Usually this happens as the plane descends to land. The pain is worse the lower the plane gets and can be quite severe on landing.

What causes the pain?

The small space behind the ear drum should normally be filled with air. This air space is connected to the back of the nose by a tiny channel, the Eustachian tube. The air on either side of the ear drum should be at the same pressure. As a plane descends the air pressure becomes higher nearer the ground. This pushes in the ear drum. To relieve this, the pressure inside the middle ear has to rise quickly too. If there is any blockage of the Eustachian tube that stops air then the ear drum becomes more and more tense from the outside pressure. This is painful. Common reasons why this might happen are; ear infections, throat infections, hay fever *etc* . In fact, any condition causing extra mucus in the ear tubes can be a problem. In some people it just happens as their Eustachian tube does not drain very well or is rather narrow and becomes easily blocked with mucus.

Treatments

If there is pain when the plane has landed, although it may be severe, it normally goes quickly. Regular painkillers such as paracetamol are useful until it does. Travellers may be advised to take some with them just in case. Fluid sometimes accumulates in the middle ear for a few days which may make hearing rather dull for a while.

Preventing ear pain when flying

Strictly speaking, anyone with colds, respiratory infections, ear infections, etc. should not to fly. However, not many people will cancel their holiday trips for this reason. The following may help people with excess mucus and those people who experience ear pains when flying.

- ◆ *Valsalvas manoeuvre* - pinch the nose and blow hard against the nose (not against the mouth). This forces air into and up the Eustachian tube to equalise the pressure behind the ear drum. A popping sensation should be felt in the ear. As soon as the plane starts to descend and a change in pressure is sensed, this should be done and repeated every few seconds until landing whenever the pressure drop sensation is felt.
- ◆ *Antihistamines* - anti-histamine tablets (available at pharmacies) at full dose, taken the day before and the day of travel, will help to limit mucus production.
- ◆ *Decongestants* - sucking menthol sweets helps to open the 'tubes' and decrease mucus on the flight. A decongestant nasal spray can also be used (such as one containing Xylometazolene - available at pharmacies). Spray the nose about one hour before the expected time of descent. Spray again 5 minutes later. Then spray every 20 minutes until landing.

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