

The National

Travelling well

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Last Updated: April 19, 2009 7:14PM UAE / April 19, 2009 3:14PM GMT

It is a fact of modern life that we are flying more. This summer, Etihad Airways plans to run 900 weekly flights carrying seven million people around the world, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. It's estimated that around two billion people travel by commercial airline every year, for pleasure and for business. It's a sector that's booming, especially in the UAE, with Emirates Airline and Qatar Airways also increasing their routes and capacities.

This is great news if you're planning a holiday – this summer you can fly direct to Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, from Abu Dhabi for the first time – but is the increased tendency to hop on a plane healthy for us? A new report published this month in the medical journal *The Lancet* highlights the fact that health problems on-board planes are set to become more frequent. This is not only due to the increased numbers of flights people are taking. The launch of the so-called super jumbos such as the Airbus A380, which carries up to 853 passengers (a Boeing 747 carries up to 524), has made the statistical likelihood of incidents rise. This latest breed of planes can fly for longer, and instead of breaking a journey with stopovers, can continue for a solid 18 to 20 hours non-stop, further increasing health concerns.

The report, conducted by Dr Mark Gendreau of Lahey Clinic Medical Center in Massachusetts, found that the most common problems associated with flying include jet lag, the spread of airborne diseases and deep vein thrombosis (DVT). It concludes that individuals should be encouraged to learn ways of minimising their personal risk. By following a few simple golden rules, that's not such a hard task.

Jet lag is the most common and least serious side effect of air travel. It typically occurs when you cross three time zones or more, causing changes to the body's natural rising and sleeping patterns. It usually takes a few days after landing to get in sync, during which time you may experience one or more of the following symptoms: dehydration, loss of appetite, headaches, sinus irritation, fatigue, disorientation, nausea, insomnia, irregular sleep patterns and irritability. When travelling east to west, symptoms seem to be worse. To limit jet lag, try to sleep during your flight, drink plenty of water and take food on-board, making sure to eat at regular intervals. Melatonin has been proven to help with jet lag, particularly when taken at sleep times in doses of 0.5-5mg. The natural hormone encourages sleep and can be prescribed by a doctor.

Air quality is a prevalent cause of illness when flying. Frequent flyers, cabin crew and pilots all have reported skin and eye irritation, headaches and dizziness as a result of the lack of oxygen flow in cabins. The circulation of air in the cabin also puts you at risk of contracting airborne diseases. The most common of those are colds and the flu; however, more dangerously, tuberculosis and sudden acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) can be spread mid-air. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, an observational study showed that, coinciding with the reduced number of flights, the peak date of the US influenza season was delayed 13 days. Less air travel resulted in the slower spread of germs.

In general, it is agreed that you are only likely to catch infections from those within two rows of your seat or with whom you come into close personal contact. To reduce your risk of infection, stay well hydrated and wash your hands regularly. Sanitising wipes can be used to wipe down the remote control and personal viewing screen, or for your hands before eating a meal. Keeping warm is another easy way to ward off colds and the flu. This is especially relevant considering the cool air that blasts through the air conditioning system on most flights. Usually, blankets and socks are provided, but it's best to be prepared by bringing your own winter warmers. Newer planes that are able to fly at lower altitudes have improved air quality.

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) is one of the most widely publicised health risks associated with flying. Along with pulmonary embolism – where a clot blocks the pulmonary artery – DVT occurs when clots form in your veins. Clots form easily in the deep veins in your legs when you are seated still over a long period. Smaller clots will break down with no long-term side effects, but larger ones can block the blood flow and cause swelling, pain and reddening to the leg. The most serious problems occur when a clot works its way up to your heart.

Immobilisation has been linked to 75 per cent of air-travel cases of DVT. Passengers move less in non-aisle seats and correspondingly, more instances of the condition have been found in those travellers. Common sense dictates that you should take an aisle seat if you can, drink plenty of water, reduce caffeine consumption and move about as much as possible on-board. Standing up in your seat and doing a few leg stretches every now and then will help. If you want to take extra precautions against DVT, consider compression stockings or taking an aspirin pre-flight to help thin the blood. Neither of these, however, is a magic bullet. It is still most important that you move about at regular intervals.

DVT most commonly occurs in those over 40 who are tall or obese. If you have a blood disease, a family history of blood clots and circulation problems, you may be at greater risk, too. Women who take hormone replacement medications, have recently had a baby or are pregnant may also be more vulnerable. Gendreau's study highlights the fact that your risk is the same whether flying business class or economy.

Although humans are fortunate to be living longer and travelling more into their old age, the boom in silver-haired backpackers adds to flight-related health concerns. With more likelihood of existing medical conditions, flinging yourself around the world in a metal tube as an older person can exacerbate health problems, as *The Lancet's* report reveals. For travellers with cardiac, pulmonary and blood disorders, the impact of cabin pressure on the body is a serious consideration, especially on long-haul flights. Those with heart problems should certainly seek medical advice before flying.



The more sleep you get on a long-haul flight, the more likely you are to avoid jet lag at your destination. Corbis

Cosmic radiation is a condition you may not be so familiar with. The likelihood of radiation exposure, which may increase the risk of some cancers, is around 100 times greater in an aircraft at 30,000 to 40,000 feet than it is on the ground. The World Health Organization is concerned about the effects of cosmic radiation on aircrews, particularly those who spend 1,000 hours or more flying per year. The average passenger will not be at any risk, unless they fly for a similar number of hours. Short-haul flights are safer in this respect as they fly at lower altitudes.

Being aware of the risks will certainly help to ensure your flight is a healthy one. Currently, the only requirements a passenger needs to meet in order to fly is to be fit enough to walk 50 metres or climb one flight of stairs without angina or becoming out of breath. Airlines are responding to the health risks by ensuring that they have resuscitation kits and satellite phones to contact doctors on the ground. But the best advice is to consult your doctor before travelling if you have an existing health condition, and use common sense.

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