



Is there a doctor on board?

A flu epidemic is only one of the risks encountered by frequent flyers

The current outbreak of swine flu which has so far infected tens of thousands worldwide has reminded frequent flyers of the health risks inherent in international travel.

Contrary to popular belief, thanks to advanced air filtration systems, aircraft are no greater breeding grounds for infections than any other crowded place, but sitting for hours on end so close to so many other (potentially sick) passengers does have its dangers.

There is also concern that passengers may occasionally be exposed to toxins from oil, the effects of which are as yet unknown.

IAPA is continually pressing for improvements in the quality of cabin air and closely monitoring all the latest findings as, without doubt, there is room

for improvement.

There are other health risks to airline passengers too. About 1,000 people a year die inflight, which is about one per one million passengers. The majority of fatalities are due to heart problems and, say health experts, most of those who die know they are gravely ill before they board.

Fortunately for those with heart trouble, most long-haul airlines – and all U.S. aircraft with 30 seats or more – now carry defibrillators to tackle a cardiac arrest on the spot. Unfortunately, in the absence of international regulations governing medical training for cabin crew, there is no guarantee they know how to respond to medical emergencies. Given the frequency of the call ‘is there a doctor on board?’ it would seem many are not.

Statistically speaking, 40 to 80 percent of flights will have an off-duty doctor among the passengers, but the medical profession has called for airlines to provide better medical kits and better first aid training for crew.

Heart attacks are the main cause of death inflight, but they account for only a fraction of medical emergencies in the air. Others are caused by neurological conditions, strokes, gastro intestinal complaints, respiratory problems and trauma. However, passengers can take some comfort from the fact that in recent years many airlines have started using ground-to-air medical advisory services, such as the Phoenix-based MedLink Response Center, which can talk crew through dealing with an emergency.

How to avoid illness when traveling

- Always carry any necessary medication in your carry-on luggage. This sounds like common sense, but airlines say it's surprising how many people with serious chronic conditions – such as diabetes – pack their medication in their checked luggage
- Try to travel with someone who knows your medical history and if flying alone wear a medical ID bracelet so crew – and hopefully a doctor on board – will be able to help if you are unconscious or too ill to communicate
- Avoid flying if you have recently had an operation as the low pressure in the aircraft causes air in body cavities to expand by as much as 30 percent, causing wounds to open
- The same goes for people who have an implant such as a splint, a tracheotomy tube or catheter as it could expand and cause injury
- People with heart disease are advised not to fly as the reduced amount of oxygen flowing through the blood may cause chest pains
- Take regular exercise on the plane to avoid Deep Vein Thrombosis, commonly referred to as DVT. DVT happens when a blood clot forms in a deep vein. It most commonly happens in the deep veins of the lower leg (calf), and can spread up to the deep veins in the thigh. There is evidence that long-haul flights (flights lasting four hours or more) may increase the risk of developing DVT.

Other tips:

- Drink plenty of fluids but avoid alcohol
- Try to get plenty of rest before and after your flight
- Eat a healthy diet
- Delay traveling if you are ill and if you become ill after an international trip you should seek medical attention.

Get cover for the unexpected.
Find out more at
iapa.com/hospital