



Washington University in St. Louis

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE



Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery

PROTECTING YOUR CHILD'S EARS DURING AN AIRPLANE FLIGHT

Many children complain of pressure and/or pain in their ears during the airplane flight. It is impossible to prevent these symptoms in every case. Certain things can be done to reduce the likelihood of discomfort.

When a plane goes up into the air, the air pressure on the outside decreases and the air in the middle ear (behind the eardrum) expands and forces itself out of the Eustachian tube (the connection between the middle ear and the back of the nose). Some children will feel pressure and popping in the ear during ascent and have pain or discomfort associated with it.

On the decent, ear pain is more common. The air pressure outside of the eardrum increases, and air must get into the space behind the ear drum through the Eustachian tube to increase air pressure there. If the Eustachian tube does not open, the ear drum is pushed in by positive pressure of the atmosphere and pain can occur. The steps taken to reduce the chances of having this pain have to do with decreasing swelling in the lining of the eustachian tube and performing tasks which will increase the chance of opening it.

- ✓ About 20 minutes before descent, you can give your child a nasal decongestant such children's Afrin nasal spray (oxymetazoline) over the counter.
- ✓ If your child has allergies and is having cold symptoms, give your child plenty of liquids.
- ✓ Be sure that your child is not sleeping as the plane begins to descend. On a long airplane flight, the plane may descend for up to one hour or more before landing.
- ✓ During descent, have your infant suck on a bottle or pacifier. For older children, chewing gum, sucking on candy, and/or frequently swallowing or taking sips of liquid can be helpful.

Again, nothing can guarantee that your child will not have difficulty with Eustachian tube dysfunction during flight, but using the above measures can increase the chances of having a comfortable flight.

NOTE: Children with ear tubes will not experience the pressure changes in the middle ear associated with flight and do not experience discomfort if the tubes are open.

PLEASE CALL IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS!

Office phone number 314-454-6162 / Monday - Friday 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM

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