Airplane earaches

1) Dear Alice,

A month ago, my right ear began feeling clogged after a long plane ride. I thought that the sensation would go away after a few days, but it hasn't; in fact, it's only worsened. It's not painful, but I feel as though I'm slowly going deaf. What should I do?

— Going deaf?

2) Dear Alice,

When I fly, I get earaches. How can I avoid this on an upcoming flight?

Answer

Dear Going deaf? and Reader 2,

Sounds like you're both under pressure... or at least your ears are. Feeling pressure in your ears during or after an airplane ride is common due to the quick elevation changes and subsequent air pressure changes between the inner ear and the surrounding environment. This is called barotrauma, barotitis media, or aerotitis media, but you may know it more commonly as airplane ear, which may cause pain or discomfort in the ear, muffled hearing, and even permanent hearing loss. For most people, yawning, swallowing, or chewing gum may relieve their discomfort, but on occasion, treatment from a health care provider may be necessary.

Airplane ear is caused by a pressure imbalance in the ear that keeps the tympanic membrane (eardrum) from vibrating properly, thus affecting your hearing and causing it to feel clogged. Typically, a small pathway called the Eustachian tube regulates the pressure balance and when you yawn, for instance, muscles in your jaw help the Eustachian tube expand, letting more air into the inner ear, and correcting the imbalance. However, sometimes the Eustachian tube doesn't open fast enough to relieve that pressure, which can contribute to the pain and discomfort that you feel.

Symptoms of airplane ear can range from mild to severe, which can include:

- Feeling pain or discomfort in your ears
• Feeling as though your ears are full or stuffy
• Having muffled hearing or slight hearing loss

On the severe end, folks with the condition may experience:

• More severe pain
• Hearing ringing in your ears
• Feeling as though you’re spinning (a sensation called vertigo)
• Vomiting due to vertigo
• Bleeding from the ear
• Having more intense pressure in the ears as though you were underwater

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [3].

If you’ve had the symptoms of airplane ear for more than a few hours or have experienced some of the more severe side effects, you may want to see a health care provider. Going deaf?, you’ve noted that you’ve experienced some of these feelings for a few days, so it may be beneficial to seek medical attention to learn more.

While this experience can be uncomfortable and, at times, painful, there are fortunately some ways to try to prevent it:

• Take-off and landing self-care measures: It can be helpful to yawn and swallow, as that can help open the Eustachian tubes. Chewing gum or sucking on candy can also have the same effect. Additionally, while it may be tempting for some to go to sleep right away, staying awake during take-off and landing can help ensure that you’re able to take these measures to help prevent airplane ear.
• Equalize your ear pressure: While pinching your nostrils, keep your mouth shut and gently blow through your nose. This can help equalize the pressure that’s in your ears. You can also try using filtered earplugs, which can help change the pressure in your ears as you ascend or descend.
• Take the appropriate medications: If you’re congested, using a nasal spray or taking an oral decongestant may be helpful. If you’re considering taking an oral decongestant and have any heart conditions, take other medications, or are pregnant, be sure to speak with your health care provider in advance to make sure it won’t cause any unintended side effects. If you take medication for allergies, it may be helpful to take that in advance of your flight.
• Modify travel plans: If you have a cold, sinus infection, or ear infection and have the ability to make changes to your plans, it may be helpful to change the flights to a time when you’re feeling better.

Hopefully, with this information, ear aches while traveling will be a distant memory!

Alice!
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