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Flight-related illnesses

Q I've seen several news reports about germs on planes and other health risks that passengers face while flying. How real are these risks?

A Air travel and health is certainly a hot topic these days. Experts on both sides of the Atlantic are looking at the quality of cabin air as well as a host of other health issues related to air travel.

For the time being, however, the only consensus appears to be that more research is needed. Fortunately, both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Academy of Sciences are studying the issue.

To date, no scientific studies have shown a conclusive link between cabin-air quality and the spread of colds, flu viruses or other illnesses.

However, passengers and flight crews are increasingly complaining of flight-related illnesses, and spot checks by consumer groups show evidence of weak airflow and germ-laden planes.

High-grade air filters, which remove bacteria and fungi from the air, are used in some commercial planes and may soon become standard on all airlines. But these filters won't solve the problem completely.

While the filters can remove germs from recirculated air and even some of the smaller viruses that float invisibly in planes, they won't help the passenger who sits next to someone sneezing and coughing with a bad cold or the flu.

Furthermore, some experts believe that post-flight illnesses are not caused by dirty air, but by one or many of the strains of flying including jet lag, lack of mobility, turbulence, poor air-pressure control and anxiety or psychological stress.

The lack of mobility during flight also has been connected with a condition called deep-vein thrombosis (DVT), the formation of blood clots in the legs, caused by sitting in cramped conditions for long periods. People most likely to develop DVT include the elderly, obese and those with a family history of the disease.

Much of the evidence linking DVT with flying is anecdotal, and again, there have been few controlled clinical studies. DVT also can occur following any long period of immobility such as a long journey in a car, train or bus.

To help improve circulation in the legs during travel, passengers should stand up and move around the plane or train every hour or two. When driving or taking a bus, visit rest stops every one to two hours as well.

There also are exercises passengers can do while seated to improve circulation and minimize the tiredness and stiffness that can result from sitting in one place for an extended period of time.

British Airways, which has devoted an entire Web site to travel health and well-being (at www.britishairways.com/health) lists a number of seated exercises in its in-flight magazine, including this: "Bend the foot upwards, spread your toes and hold for three seconds. Point the foot downward, clenching toes and hold for three seconds. Repeat three times."

Air travelers can further minimize some of the ill effects associated with air travel by getting plenty of rest before the trip; avoiding caffeine and alcohol; eating sensibly and staying well hydrated, preferably with water during the flight, and washing hands with an antibacterial soap during and after the flight.

This column is designed to answer agent questions of general interest to the trade. Please address your questions to Dr. Connor at bconnor@pol.net.

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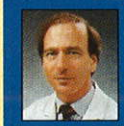

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