

Flying with young children



By Dr. Danielle Grenier

Q: I'm taking my one-year-old and six-year-old on their first airplane trip in a few weeks. Is there anything I should know in advance?

A: Plan at least six months in advance of a flight, and especially when you're travelling abroad with babies or young children. The whole family should have documented proof of routine immunizations, and additional ones might be needed depending on the travel destination. If your child has a health problem, contact your doctor to talk about specific things you should do before flying. You should have a list of medical conditions and contact numbers for health care. Contact your airline to find out what you are allowed to carry onboard.

Air travel is not recommended for babies younger than seven days of age. This is because cabin pressure in an airplane changes often, and newborn babies' systems may have trouble adjusting. Airlines have different policies about age of air travel, so it's best to check before you make plans. If your baby is younger than seven days and must travel by air, talk to your doctor first.

Here are tips to prevent injury or discomfort during the flight:

Babies who do not have their own seat must be held securely during takeoff and landing, in a parent's lap as directed by the flight attendant. You should not use a sling or front infant carrier to hold your baby on an airplane. Parents who purchase a ticket for their baby may bring their own child safety seat, provided it is purchased in Canada and it has a national safety label that indicates it is certified for use on an aircraft.

If possible, have children seated away from the aisle to avoid potential injury from service trolleys, passengers walking in aisles, and from hot meals or liquids being passed over the aisle seat.

Changes in cabin pressure can cause ear pain, especially for younger children because they have smaller eustachian tubes (a tube in the ear that helps even out pressure). For babies, breastfeeding, or sucking from a bottle or on a soother may

offer some relief, especially during takeoff and landing. For older children, chewing sugarless gum or drinking water may help. If your child is bothered by 'blocked ears', help him by having him forcibly exhale against closed lips while pinching his nose. If possible, your child shouldn't fly within two weeks of having an ear infection.

Some children are more sensitive to motion sickness than others. If your child has had motion sickness before and is older than two years of age, you can try giving an over-the-counter antinausea medication 30 to 60 minutes before departure. Side effects include drowsiness and dry mouth.

Additional recommendations if your child has diarrhea:

Diarrhea is usually caused by a virus and less frequently by bacteria that are acquired from someone who has the illness, but less frequently it can come from eating contaminated food. Diarrhea drains water and salts from your child, and if these are not put back quickly, your child can become dehydrated. Parents of young children should travel with an oral rehydration solution, which is an exact mixture of water, salts and sugar that is absorbed by the body. Oral rehydration solutions come premixed in sachet format. If your child is breastfeeding and has diarrhea, continue to offer breast milk. Over-the-counter medications to stop diarrhea aren't recommended. Talk to your doctor before offering them to your older child. To stop harmful germs from spreading, wash your hands often and carry a hand sanitizer product when travelling.

Here's what to keep in mind if your child has food allergies or special dietary needs:

If your child has a food allergy, she should carry an adrenaline kit (e.g., EpiPen [DEY, USA]) and antihistamines, and wear a MedicAlert accessory at all times. Most airlines can accommodate specific dietary needs if you let them know in advance. If you are concerned that any of the airline food may not be safe for your child, bring your own food on the plane. Although many airlines no longer offer peanuts as snacks, some passengers may bring them onboard. If your child has a severe peanut allergy, you should alert the airline and an in-flight attendant. If you think your child is having an allergic reaction during the flight, notify the flight personnel and administer the EpiPen as shown by your doctor. An allergic reaction can occur for the first time during a flight. You may need a note from your doctor to carry an EpiPen onboard. Check with the airline in advance.

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This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper