

## Flying and Your Child's Ears

Many of us have felt that weird ear-popping sensation when we fly. For kids (especially babies and young children), it can feel especially odd and even be scary at first. But it's a common, normal part of flying. This sometimes uncomfortable sensation is related to pressure changes in the air space behind the eardrum (the middle ear). Normally, the eustachian tube, a passageway that leads from the middle ear to the back of the throat behind the nose, equalizes the air pressure in the middle ear to the outside air pressure by opening and letting air reach the middle ear. When our ears "pop" while yawning or swallowing, the eustachian tubes are adjusting the air pressure in the middle ears. Whether you're flying, scuba diving, climbing a mountain, or even riding in an elevator, air pressure decreases as you go higher and increases as you go lower. If the pressure on both sides of the ear drum isn't equalized, it can cause pain.

In kids, however, the relatively narrow eustachian tubes might not work well, especially if they're clogged with mucus from an ear infection or cold, or blocked by enlarged or swollen adenoids. That's why so many babies cry during those last few minutes of the flight, as the air pressure in the cabin increases as the plane prepares to land.

But the pain is only temporary — it won't cause any lasting problems for kids and usually will ease within a few minutes as the eustachian tubes open to let the air pressure equalize on both sides of the eardrums. In some cases, a child may continue to have ear pain for longer periods (up to several hours) if the ears don't "pop." You can continue to give your child pain relievers according to the package directions until the pain eases. If it continues for more than several hours, call your doctor for advice.

If your child has an ear infection, your doctor may recommend delaying flying, if possible, until the infection is gone. This will help your child avoid increased pain and a possible rupture, or tear, of the eardrum. In kids who have ear tubes or an opening in the ear drum (perforation), the flight will be easier since the air pressure equalizes through this opening and they do not feel the change in air pressure during take-off or landing.

### What Can Help Ease Ear Pain?

These tips can help equalize the air pressure in your child's ears and prevent or decrease ear pain during air travel. Have your child:

- **Drink plenty of non-caffeinated fluids** (water is best) throughout the flight. Drinking a lot is very important. It encourages swallowing, which opens the Eustachian tubes. Also, airplane

air is dry, which thickens nasal mucus, making it more likely for the Eustachian tubes to become clogged.

- **Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen** about a half hour before takeoffs or landings if you know your child has ear pain when flying.
- **Chew gum or suck on hard candy** (only if your child is over 3 years old).
- **Take a bottle or pacifier or breastfeed.** If you bottle-feed, make sure your baby is sitting upright while drinking.
- **Yawn frequently.**
- **Stay awake for takeoff and landing.** During sleep, we don't swallow as often, so it's harder to keep the air pressure in the middle ear equalized.
- **Practice a breathing exercise.** Older kids and teens can practice this exercise during a flight's ascent and descent: Breathe in slowly, then gently pinch the tip of the nose and exhale through the nose while closing the mouth. Repeat as necessary.

If your child takes medicines that contain antihistamines or decongestants, talk to your doctor about whether to continue them during the flight.

With a little patience and some simple precautions, you can make your next family flight less stressful and more comfortable for both you and your child.