



How to Protect your Ears During an Airplane Flight

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Many people complain of pressure and/or pain in their ears during the plane's descent. 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 nose). Some people will feel pressure and popping in the ear during ascent, but usually there is little pain or discomfort associated with it.

On descent, the air pressure increases outside of the eardrum, and air must get into the middle ear through the Eustachian tube to increase air pressure there. If the Eustachian tube does not open, pain and blockage of the ear 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.

1. About one hour before expected descent, take a decongestant (such as Sudafed- 12hr).
2. About 30 minutes before the flight use a nasal spray (such as Afrin or Neo-Synephrine).
3. If you have allergies and are having symptoms, an antihistamine should be taken.
4. Avoid drinking alcohol before or during the flight.
5. Drink plenty of liquids to stay well hydrated.
6. Be sure that you are 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. If you might be sleeping, ask the flight attendant to awaken you before descent.
7. During descent, be sure that you are chewing gum, sucking on candy, and/or frequently swallowing or taking sips of liquids.
8. Some people find that specially designed ear plugs called Ear Planes help. They are available at the drugstore.

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