

Kids on planes

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A travel medicine practitioner who also happens to be a pediatrician offers advice on vacationing with little ones, especially traveling by air, to pass along to parents.

"In America there are two classes of travel—first class, and with children."

—Robert Benchley, American humorist

As summer nears and vacation plans begin to take shape, on the mind of many a parent is not only choosing the right resort and the best time to go, but inevitably bracing for what, for many, will be the fastest way to get there—air travel. As the quotation by the American humorist Robert Benchley suggests, air travel with kids is not the roomy "I'll have a martini"-and-fall-asleep-and-wake-up-when-I-get-there" experience of first class. No, flying with children can deter even the hardiest of travelers.

With a few tips, however, parents and adults flying with kids can diminish some of the angst that can set in at the thought of trying to subdue a crying baby in flight or concerns with potential risks posed to children, such as dehydration and gastrointestinal discomfort, by sending them up in the air.

Karl Neumann, MD, a pediatrician, travel medicine practitioner, clinical associate professor of pediatrics at Weill Cornell



Karl Neumann, MD

Medical College, Cornell University, and clinical associate attending pediatrician at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Cornell Medical Center, New York, provides guidance on flying with children on the website KidsTravelDoc.¹ Billed as "a pediatrician's guide to travel and outdoor recreational activities," the website provides pediatricians with easy and accessible articles

to help answer many common questions about traveling with children.

This article pulls together information from a number of articles written by Neumann on common concerns and questions regarding air travel with infants and children.

It is hoped that pediatricians can use it as an easy guide when talking to parents and other adults facing travel with little ones. As such, most of the information is presented in table form, with each table highlighting tips for managing a specific issue or concern.

Excessive crying: the mother of all worries

Among the most worrisome of worries when flying with children is an infant or child who cries excessively while in flight,

TABLE
1

THINGS *NOT* TO DO TO STOP AN INFANT FROM CRYING

	RECOMMENDATION	REASONS
Sedation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of antihistamines or other substances to induce sedation is discouraged by the FDA and the AAP. Do not test out the effect of antihistamines in an infant or child prior to flying to assess the response. Data is scarce on the correct dosage for sedation or when to repeat dosing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Antihistamines can cause restlessness in some infants and therefore contribute to agitation and crying. Other more rare adverse effects of antihistamines include constipation and breathing issues. No evidence is available on whether sedating infants on long flights lessens jet lag, but surveys indicate that jet lag is only a minor issue for infants and children.
Overfeeding to prevent dehydration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not overfeed infants or children during a flight because it may actually increase gastrointestinal discomfort and therefore crying. Feed infants the same amount in flight as you do when at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Air in stomachs and intestines expands by 20% because of lower cabin atmospheric pressure while at cruising altitudes. For infants with far smaller organs than adults, this expansion can cause great discomfort. Parents don't need to worry about in-flight dehydration because it is a myth; generally dehydration is a risk only after severe and continuous vomiting and/or diarrhea, heavy exercising in a hot environment, profuse sweating, and no access to fluids. Adults often erroneously interpret dry mouths and throats in flight as dehydration when the feeling of dryness actually comes from the air conditioning in the cabin removing most of the moisture in the air.

Abbreviations: AAP, American Academy of Pediatrics; FDA, Food and Drug Administration.
From: Neumann K²; Neumann K³; Neumann K.⁴

not only raising worries of the child's physical discomfort but also of the parent's discomfort at disrupting other passengers' comfort. If that sounds like a syllogism, it is in the sense that better managing a child's physical discomfort while in the air will go a long way to alleviate excessive crying and the subsequent discomfort of both parents and other passengers contending with an inconsolable child.

Neumann is more to the point. "Forget lousy food, airport delays, and turbulence. One of air travelers' biggest nightmare is sitting near a cute, cuddly little baby that suddenly morphs into a nonstop noise machine emitting high-decibel, ear-piercing, headache-producing,

sleep-preventing terror," he says in his updated article on infants, air travel, and excessive crying.² "An even worse nightmare: It's your child."

Neumann is quick to point out that surveys show that most infants do not cry during flight but tend to sleep well and even better than they do while at home. When they do cry, however, surveys indicate it as one of the most objectionable features of travel.

Although no hard facts exist on why infants cry excessively in flight, when they do many factors can converge and contribute to overall "general discomfort" that may result in crying.

"Infants are creatures of habit.

Air travel upsets their routines, disrupting eating and sleeping schedules," says Neumann. "It places them in new surroundings, away from their own cribs, in new and often uncomfortable sleeping positions, and among strange noises and unfamiliar faces."

Surveys also suggest, he says, that infants who cry excessively in flight often cry excessively at home and at about the same time.

Do's and don't's to prevent or stop excessive crying

What can parents do to ease the excessive crying of an infant in flight? In answering this question, Neumann emphasizes 2 main

TABLE 2

THINGS TO TRY TO PREVENT OR STOP EXCESSIVE CRYING

	RECOMMENDATION	REASONS
Simulate home sleeping environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Drape a loose blanket over the infant (ensuring enough space for easy breathing) to decrease noise and light. ○ Don't overdress them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Most infants prefer to sleep in dark, cool, and quiet surroundings.
Induce calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use items that can induce calm in the infant or child, such as toys, familiar blankets, bottles, appropriate treats, handheld electronics, and a pacifier (even if not used at home). ○ Sing and hum. ○ Walk with the infant in the aisle. ○ Remain calm yourself. 	
Address ear pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If infants are sleeping during landings, let them sleep. ○ Give a child acetaminophen or ibuprofen 30 minutes before descent, if the child had a history of ear pain during descent. ○ Teach children to blow firmly, as if blowing their nose, while pinching their nostrils with a closed mouth; repeat several times and swallow (Valsalva maneuver). ○ Older children can chew gum, suck on hard candies, yawn, and move their jaws from side to side. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ear pain is common, particularly when descending. Ask the flight attendant to inform you when descent begins. ○ Maneuvers, such as the Valsalva, can be used to open the eustachian tubes. Ear pain on descent (and to a lesser degree ascent) is caused by changes in air pressure that affect the eustachian tubes, which allow air to pass freely from the air space in the middle ear and back to the nose.

From: Neumann K²; Neumann K.⁵

things parents commonly do that they should not do: sedate an infant or child with antihistamines or other sedating substances, or overfeeding while in flight to prevent or reduce dehydration (Table 1).^{2,3,4}

What parents can do is try to simulate the home sleeping environment, use items that can calm the infant or child, address possible ear pain associated particularly when ascending and descending, and, importantly, stay calm themselves (Table 2).^{2,5}

“Stay calm, if possible. Infants feel an adult’s stress and cry in response, say some psychologists,” Neumann advises. “Attempt to make peace with your neighbors before they make an enemy of you. Apologize

for the disturbance. Tell them that you are doing everything possible to quiet your baby.”²

Parents also can try what pediatrician Robert Hamilton, MD, calls “the Hold” to stop their infant from screaming (for the demonstration, log on to bit.ly/HOLD-video).

Safety issues

For healthy newborns, flying is considered safe. Infants with a history of serious medical issues (eg, significant premature birth, or heart and lung problems around the time of birth), however, should receive medical clearance for their first year of life before they fly, says Neumann.⁶

Because individual airlines may have age restrictions on travel for

very young infants, Neumann recommends that parents go to the websites of individual airlines to review policies on travelling with infants and children. Generally, travel may be restricted only within the first 2 weeks of life and often airlines will not mandate the restriction.

Among other safety issues to keep in mind when flying with children are the use of safety seats in flight⁷ and flying with respiratory illness or ear infection.⁶ ■



For more air travel safety tips and references, go to

ContemporaryPediatrics.com/kids-on-planes