

Travel - children and airline travel

Travelling by air with children can be challenging, but planning ahead can reduce parental stress. Young children may find the confinement difficult to handle, especially during long flights, and the change of cabin pressure during take off and landing can hurt their ears. On the other hand, travelling by plane can be an exciting adventure for children. The trick is to accommodate their needs and focus on the fun. Newborns are vulnerable to infections, and the recirculated air inside a plane can increase their risk of illness. Unless the situation demands travel, it is generally better to wait until your baby is a little older. Be advised by your doctor.

Pre-flight suggestions

Planning ahead can make the flight more enjoyable for your child. Suggestions include:

- Take your child to the doctor for a medical check-up.
- Ensure immunisations are up-to-date.
- Arrange vaccinations (if necessary) with your doctor.
- Ask friends or your travel agent for advice on children-friendly airlines. Some airlines are more accommodating than others.
- Ask your travel agent for suggestions on airline travel with children.
- If you are travelling alone, ask the airline if it is possible to have an 'assistant' who will help you at each stop. For example, the staff member might collect your luggage for you.
- Arrange in advance for children's meals.
- Children aged two years and over must have their own seats on international flights.
- Children aged three years and over must have their own seats on domestic flights.
- Ask for bulkhead seats or seats near an exit to give your child a safe spot to play on the floor.
- If you have a young baby, arrange with the airline for a bassinet.
- A car seat can be taken on board, but you will need to book a seat for it.
- Older children will appreciate having a window seat.
- If flying over a long distance, try to book an overnight flight to coincide with your child's sleeping habits.

Carry-on bag

Make sure your carry-on bag holds every item your child is likely to need during the flight.

Suggestions include:

- Change of clothes
- Change mat
- Nappies
- Extra plastic pants
- Baby wipes
- Tissues
- Nappy rash creams
- Bottles of milk
- Favourite snacks, such as cheese or biscuits
- Dummy
- Spill-proof drinks
- Any medication they need on a regular basis
- Paracetamol appropriate to your child's age and weight
- Toys and games.

At the airport

Suggestions include:

- Dress your child in bright clothes so that they stand out in a crowd.

- Get to the airport with time to spare so that your child can run around or play for a while.
- Change your baby's nappy prior to boarding, as space is cramped inside plane toilets.

On the plane

Suggestions include:

- Dress your child in a couple of light layers, so you can add or remove layers as necessary. Remember that blankets are available.
- Don't hesitate to ask your flight attendants for help. For example, they may be allowed to warm bottles for you.
- Don't try to change your baby's nappy on your lap – plane toilets have pull-down change tables.
- Encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids to reduce the risk of dehydration.
- Take toys that don't take up too much luggage space like books, pencils and drawing or colouring books, and handheld computer games.
- Offer toys one at a time, replacing each toy with a fresh one once the child shows signs of boredom.
- Younger children will appreciate having their favourite 'security' toy on the flight.
- To cut down on fights over sharing, make sure each child has their own toys.
- Ask flight attendants for playing cards or colouring books and pencils, which many airlines supply free to young passengers.
- Older children may enjoy a trip to the flight deck. Ask your flight attendant.

Ear pain

The change in cabin pressure during take off and, in particular, during plane descent can hurt the ears. Swallowing eases the pressure, but the trick is getting your child to swallow at the right time. Suggestions include:

- Try to time your baby's feeds for during take off and landing.
- Give your child something to drink or eat.
- If your child isn't thirsty or hungry, give them lollies (if they are old enough)
- Also ear drops which numb the eardrum (Auralgan) can be used to ease the pain. They can be purchased without script.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Airline
- Family and friends for advice
- Travel agent.

Things to remember

- Ask friends or your travel agent for advice on children-friendly airlines, since some airlines are more accommodating than others.
- Children aged two years and over must have their own seats on international flights.
- Children aged three years and over must have their own seats on domestic flights.
- Pack plenty of toys and favourite snacks.
- Encourage your child to eat or drink during take off and landing to prevent earache.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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