
Motion sickness

Summary

- Some people are particularly sensitive to certain kinds of motion.
 - Symptoms of motion sickness include dizziness, nausea and vomiting, burping, and sweating.
 - Treatment is often best taken before the motion begins.
-

Motion sickness may occur in response to certain types of movement, whether it is the person or what they are looking at (for example, a movie screen) that is moving. Motion sickness is not considered to be a disease as it can occur in nearly every person.

Some people are particularly sensitive to certain motion and very little may be required before they feel ill. Children between the ages of two and 12 years are particularly prone to motion sickness.

In part, motion sickness is thought to take place when there is a mismatch between the information that the brain receives from the inner ear balance mechanism (vestibular system) and what the eyes 'see'. For example, if the eyes tell the brain that a person is stationary (such as looking at the interior of a cabin on a ship), but the vestibular system senses head movements (due to motion of the ship), then this is thought to cause a mismatch of messages to the brain and leads to motion sickness.

Frequent vomiting can lead to dehydration and low blood pressure, so it is important to seek prompt medical attention if this occurs. Motion sickness is also known as travel sickness, airsickness, carsickness or seasickness.

Risk factors for motion sickness

While most people may experience motion sickness, some factors may make motion sickness more likely to occur, including:

- Women are generally more susceptible than men.
- Children are more susceptible than adults (generally between the ages of two and 12 years).
- Hormonal factors include pregnancy, menstrual cycle factors and oral contraceptives.
- Other balance disorders may be a factor, particularly vestibular disease and migraine.
- A person who has experienced motion sickness in the past may have worse symptoms on future trips by expecting to feel sick.

Symptoms of motion sickness

Symptoms can range from mild to serious, and can include:

- dizziness
- generally feeling unwell and tired
- excessive production of saliva
- headache
- nausea, vomiting
- burping
- sweating.

Long-term or repeated exposure to motion

If a person is exposed to motion for an extended period (for example, during a long journey at sea) or has repeated exposures, their brain may adapt in time to the constant motion and they may no longer experience motion sickness.

Reducing the risk of motion sickness

There are different things you can try in order to prevent motion sickness or at least reduce its effects, including:

- During motion, look at an earth-fixed object. For example, if you are on a boat, try and look at the horizon or land masses from the deck, rather than the inside of the cabin. Also, car passengers should sit in the front seat and look through the window, rather than sitting in the rear and looking at objects moving with the interior of the car (such as reading a book).
- Motion sickness does not usually occur when movement is under a person's control. The driver of a car is less likely to get motion sickness than a passenger. Position yourself where you will experience the least motion, such as over the wings in an aeroplane or in the centre of a ship.
- The larger the vehicle, the less susceptible it is to motion so, if possible, try to travel on a ship rather than a small boat.
- Some people find that closing their eyes is the best way to eliminate sensory confusion.
- Avoid alcohol for 24 hours before travelling and during the trip.
- Make sure you have plenty of fresh air. Fumes or smoke can exacerbate symptoms.
- On brief journeys, try not to eat or drink anything.
- On long journeys, eat and drink sparingly and often.
- Anxiety worsens symptoms. Use relaxation techniques and if your anxiety is marked, you could consider professional counselling.

Treatment for motion sickness

Medications either calm the nerves of the inner ear or soothe the brain's vomiting centre. However, nearly all motion sickness pills are most effective if they are taken before you feel sick. Some motion sickness pills may cause drowsiness as a side effect. You may need to experiment with different medication to find which one works best for you. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for more information.

Research suggests that ginger can help to ease the symptoms of motion sickness. You could chew on raw ginger or make a quick tea by adding minced ginger to boiling water.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- Psychologist or counsellor

Things to remember

- Some people are particularly sensitive to certain kinds of motion.
- Symptoms of motion sickness include dizziness, nausea and vomiting, burping, and sweating.
- Treatment is often best taken before the motion begins.

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

Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital (RVEEH)

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.