

**CENTRAL OHIO EAR, NOSE AND THROAT, INC.**

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## **AIR TRAVEL AND EUSTACHIAN TUBE PROBLEMS**

Air travel is sometimes associated with rapid changes in air pressure. To maintain comfort and avoid problems, the Eustachian tube must function properly as a pressure-equalizing valve. That is, it must open frequently and widely enough to equalize the changes in pressure. When an aircraft ascends, atmospheric pressure decreases, resulting in a relative increase in middle ear pressure. When the aircraft descends, just the opposite occurs: atmospheric pressure increases and there is a relative decrease in middle ear pressure. Either condition may be uncomfortable if the Eustachian tube does not function normally. Usually, the descent is associated with more discomfort. However, to avoid middle ear problems associated with flying, you should not fly if you have a cold, sinus infection, or severe allergies.

Actifed, Sudafed (30 mg), and Afrin are available without prescriptions. If you wish, you may ask the pharmacist for a generic equivalent. Actifed and Sudafed are available in tablets or in liquid form for children. Afrin is available in a children's preparation. Always refer to the package for the appropriate dosage.

The instructions are as follows:

- 1) Take Actifed or Sudafed the day before, and on the day of your flight. Continue the medication for 24 hours after your flight if you experienced ear discomfort.
- 2) Use the nose spray, as directed, shortly before boarding the aircraft. Should your ears "plug up", hold your nose and swallow or make yawning gestures. This will help to suck excess air pressure out of the middle ear.
- 3) Thirty minutes before ascent, use the nasal spray again. Chew gum to stimulate swallowing.

Should your ears "plug up", try the yawning or swallowing technique as described above. If that is not effective, you may try to unblock your ears as follows:

- 1) Pinch your nostrils shut.
- 2) Take a mouthful of air.
- 3) Using your cheek and throat muscles, force air into the back of your nose as if you were trying to blow your thumb and fingers off your nostrils. If you hear a pop in your ears, you have succeeded. You may have to repeat this several times during descent.

Babies cannot intentionally pop their ears, but it helps if they are sucking on a bottle or pacifier. Feed your baby, and do not allow him/her to sleep during descent. Remember, it is unwise to fly if you have a cold, sinus infection, or severe allergies. Should flying be necessary, DO NOT hold your nose and blow forcibly to try to blow air up the Eustachian tube into the middle ear (Valsalva maneuver).

If you continue to experience problems once you land, you should immediately see a physician.

There is a product over-the-counter at local pharmacies or drug stores called "Ear Planes" which are earplugs designed to help equalize the pressure when flying. Use as directed if needed.