

Flying with children

Holidays and international travel are generally exciting for kids - but air travel can present its own challenges. Portland Hospital experts give their tips for making your journey as painless as possible.....

If you're setting off on your travels with your little one in tow you might be stressing slightly about the flight - especially if it's your first time or you've got kids of different ages to keep entertained.

But feel reassured that for most children flying is a walk in the park and most won't be bothered by the air pressure changes at all.

'It's true to say that in healthy babies and children flying is actually less risky than it is for adults', says Mr Nico Jonas a consultant paediatric ENT specialist at the Portland, who also works at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge.

'There is nothing inherently dangerous to children's health about flying - they are actually less prone to developing deep vein thrombosis (blood clots) compared to adults and because they naturally fidget more they don't have to worry as much about consciously getting up and moving about.

'Flying long haul carries the risk of dehydration but children aren't at any higher risk than adults and provided they drink regularly they should be fine.'

Looking after their ears

'It's a myth that all children feel pain and pressure in their ears on flights,' says Mr Jonas, a consultant paediatric ENT specialist at the Portland, who also works at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge.

'Children with healthy ears and no infections shouldn't feel any discomfort, even on take-off or landing. It's only if they have an ear infection and/or a cold with build-up of fluid in the middle ear that it may be painful. This is because the Eustachian tube, which runs between the middle ear and the throat and is designed to control the air pressure in the middle ear can become inflamed and partially blocked. As a consequence air cannot move freely in and out of the middle ear resulting in negative pressure in the middle ear and subsequent pain and discomfort.'

Mr Jonas says the changes in cabin pressure felt at landing and take-off can be minimised by encouraging babies to suck on a bottle or breast if breastfeeding (if that's possible with seat belt restrictions). 'Older children should be encouraged to suck or chew on a sweet, which allows for opening and closing of the Eustachian tube and correction of the middle ear pressure on landing and take -off,' advises Mr Jonas.

'For older children (usually over five) you can teach them to "pop" their own ears by taking a deep breath and attempting to breath out through the nose while pinching it shut. The breath won't be able to pass out of the nose and will instead travel down the Eustachian tube and help normalise the pressure.

' This procedure is called the Valsalva manoeuvre and you can watch videos on how to teach your child to do this on YouTube. It can be a little uncomfortable the first time you do it but it's a skill well worth learning.'

If a child is suffering from chronic glue ear (fluid in the middle ear) doctors can prescribe a device called an Oto Vent balloon. This balloon is designed to teach children to perform the Valsalva manoeuvre by attempting to inflate the balloon through the nose while pinching one nostril closed and blowing out through the open nostril.

Flying with special health problems

'We're always asked if it's safe for children who have just had grommet operations (ventilation tubes inserted in the eardrum to allow air into the middle ear and displace the fluid building up in the middle ear) if it's safe to fly and the answer is yes, ' says Mr Jonas.

' With premature babies and children with underlying heart, lung or serious medical conditions it's always best to see your doctor before you fly as your airline may request a fitness to fly certificate . To assess your child's fitness to fly he or she may be asked to undergo an overnight sleep study in a room with air pressure similar to that on board an aircraft so that their blood oxygen levels at this pressure can be monitored.

'Children wanting to fly after tonsil surgery will generally have to wait two weeks because of the risk of bleeding.'

Keeping them entertained

Portland Hospital play specialist Manisha Wickrama recommends planning ahead for a plane journey. ' You can't just take your kids on a plane and expect them to sit still for hours on end without something to do.

' Try and make a game of your trip by talking about it in advance and involving them in the preparation. Maybe they could pack a little rucksack with some favourite toys and books for the trip - for example a Peppa Pig or Star Wars figure .Taking a favourite teddy or blanket may also help them feel secure and help settle them,' says Ms Wickrama.

' A mini pack of Lego may also engage them and colouring books and crayons can also keep them entertained as can sticker books.

' Explain to them about the importance of wearing their seatbelt in advance and that the stewards and stewardesses will be coming round to check - turn it all into an adventure.'

Ms Wickrama says that iPads and iPods can also help pass the hours onboard. ' Download some of their favourite TV programmes , cartoons and games before you go (don't forget the headphones) and make sure the device is charged (or that you have an onboard charger!).

' Try and intersperse the screen time with other activities though so they are not using it for longer than an hour or so a time. Break it up with activities such as colouring and reading.

'Reading a favourite storybook to your child can also soothe them and calm them and help them fall asleep if that's what you want - for instance if you're trying to keep them to their normal sleep pattern as much as possible.'

' Taking some mini treats with you that you can give them at various stages of the journey such as small sticker packs, favourite character books, packets of fruit or mini chocolate bars can also give help break up the journey with new things to focus on.

'If you make the effort to keep them entertained than your time onboard should fly.'