Dear Alice,

A month ago, my right ear began feeling clogged after a long plane ride. I thought that the sensation would go away after a few days, but it hasn't; in fact, it's only worsened. It's not painful, but I feel as though I'm slowly going deaf. What should I do?

? Going deaf?

Answer

Dear Going deaf,

Sounds like you're under a bit of pressure? or at least your ears are. Feeling pressure in your ears during or after an airplane ride is very common because of the quick elevation changes and subsequent air pressure changes between the inner ear and the surrounding environment. The super technical term for this condition is "airplane ear," which may cause pain or discomfort in the ear, muffled hearing, and even permanent hearing loss. For most people, yawning, swallowing, or chewing gum may often solve that pressure problem, but on occasion that may not do the trick.

Airplane ear is caused by a pressure imbalance in the ear that keeps the tympanic membrane (eardrum) from vibrating as it should, thus affecting your hearing and causing that clogged feeling. Normally, a small pathway called the Eustachian tube regulates the pressure balance and when you yawn, for instance, muscles in your jaw help the Eustachian tube expand, letting more air into the inner ear, and correcting the imbalance. Think of it as an equivalent to a nice deep breath during a particularly stressful exam. As we know, however, sometimes a deep breath isn't enough to ease the pressure. When this happens in the ear a vacuum is created, fluid may begin to accumulate, the eardrum may stretch, not vibrate correctly, or, worst case scenario, the ear drum or surrounding blood vessels may rupture.

The more severe symptoms of airplane ear are often accompanied by pain or discomfort and require a health care provider's attention. Even though you may not be experiencing severe symptoms, in the same way that prolonged pressure from school can take its toll, continuing pressure in your ears, even without pain, are good reason to make an appointment with a health care provider.

Here are some tips to prevent prolonged and/or painful airplane ear on future flights:
During take-off and landing, try swallowing, chewing gum, or sucking on a mint or hard candy (this activates muscles that open the Eustachian tubes).

Yawn (it activates those same muscles) but try not to sleep during ascent and descent because it may keep you from swallowing regularly and releasing pressure.

Pinch your nose with your fingers, inhale through the mouth, and direct the air going out as though gently blowing your nose.

Take an oral decongestant or use a nasal spray approximately an hour before landing (this should be avoided by people with certain heart conditions, thyroid problems, and high blood pressure).

With these tips in hand hopefully the only pressure you will be feeling in the future will come from typical demands of life!

Alice!
Category:
General Health
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments

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Resources
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