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Ears, Altitude, and Airplane Travel

You may be able avoid ear discomfort during air travel- the most common medical complaint of airplane travelers- if you lend your ears to these suggestions from the American Academy of Otolaryngology- Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS). It's the national association of physicians who treat the ear, nose, throat, and related areas of the head and neck.

- Swallow. This activates the muscle that opens the Eustachian tube which connects the back of the nose with the middle ear. You swallow more often when you chew gum or let mints melt in your mouth.
- Yawn. This is an even better activator of that muscle.
- Avoid sleep during the descent. You may not swallow enough to keep up with the pressure changes.
- Unblock your ears by using the following method.
 - Pinch your nostrils shut
 - Take a mouthful of air
 - Using your cheek and throat muscles, force the air into the back of your nose as if you were trying to blow your thumb and forefingers off your nostrils.
- When you hear a loud pop in your ears, you have succeeded. You may have to repeat this several times during descent.
- If you are traveling with a baby, give him or her a bottle or a pacifier to suck, and do not allow sleep during descent.
- Use a decongestant pill or nasal spray an hour or so before descent. This shrinks the membranes and makes the ears pop more easily. Travelers with allergy problems should take their antihistamine tablets at the beginning of the flight for the same reason. **WARNING:** decongestant tablets and sprays should be avoided by persons with heart disease, high blood pressure, irregular heart rhythms, thyroid disease, or excessive nervousness.

- Many people report success using **Ear Planes®**- a set of ear plugs that contain a valve to release pressure more slowly. They are worn during descent and are available in pharmacies and airport gift shops.
- Even after landing you can continue the pressure equalizing techniques, but avoid using nose sprays for a prolonged period. If your ears fail to open or if pain persists, you may need to seek medical attention.