

Take the Pain Out of Travel:

Simple exercises can help to prevent pain and make travel much more comfortable and enjoyable.

By Paul Weiss, PT, Dip. MDT

This summer, many people will be jumping aboard planes, trains, and automobiles for their annual summer vacations. Summer travel may mean sitting for extended periods of time, and sitting in one position for too long can lead to leg cramps and other more serious problems such as the deep vein thrombosis.

According to Susan Scherer, PT, PhD, associate professor of physical therapy at Regis University in Denver and member of the American Physical Therapy Association's (APTA's) Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Section, blood clots, called deep vein thrombosis (DVT), can occur after periods of being immobile, such as on long plane flights or extended rides in cars.

Scherer notes that the risk of DVT increases during travel of 8 hours or more and that an estimated 10 percent of passengers on long flights may develop a DVT. A clot in the legs may dislodge and travel to the lungs, called pulmonary embolus. The symptoms of leg DVT include swelling in one or both legs and tenderness in the calf. Symptoms of a pulmonary embolus include shortness of breath and a high heart rate. "People who experience any of these symptoms should always see the doctor, especially if they occur following a long period of immobilization," she says.

In addition to sitting for long periods of time, many factors can increase your risk of developing deep vein thrombosis, including: blood clotting disorders; prolonged bed rest, such as during a long hospital stay; injury or surgery; pregnancy; cancer; heart failure; birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy; pacemakers; obesity; and smoking.

Compression stockings are recommended to help reduce the risk of DVT. "The compression helps keep excess blood from remaining in the leg veins, helping to prevent clot formation," says Scherer. Physical therapists also suggest that when you have little room to move and stretch, do some simple, seated exercises to keep the blood flowing, the joints mobile, and the muscles relaxed while en route. A selection of exercises recommended by the APTA can be found in Cedar Hill Physical Therapy's "In Flight Fitness Guide."

"Simple exercise can help prevent other typical symptoms experienced by people who travel, including leg cramping, toe cramping, and general lower-body aching," says Paul Weiss, PT, Dip. MDT of Cedar Hill Physical Therapy. "Sitting still for long periods may lead to swelling of the feet, which becomes obvious to many passengers when they try to put their shoes back on at the end of their flight or drive," Weiss says.

Along with the APTA, Weiss suggests that passengers not stay seated for the duration of the flight or drive and recommends that passengers walk up and down the aisle of the plane or stop the vehicle in order to take walking breaks every hour or so. This will work the leg muscles and ease the back. Of course in the case of a flight, that is only if the captain has turned off the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign.

Performing these exercises will keep the leg muscles from contracting and will help relieve stiffness during travel. The exercises also will help prevent fluid build-up in the legs, and stretching the back and the muscles around the torso will prevent stiffening.

"Sitting in such a cramped position also puts a lot of stress on the lower back, especially for people who have pre-existing back problems. If you have brought along hand luggage or a rolling case that fits under the seat, use them as foot rests to elevate your feet so that your knees are slightly higher than your hips when you are sitting," suggests Weiss.

Another consideration while flying is the dehydration that occurs from the high altitudes at which planes fly and the dry, pressurized cabin air. These conditions may lead to muscle cramping and aching, so the APTA advises passengers to drink plenty of water before and during the flight.

If you have an existing back problem or are at risk for developing deep vein thrombosis, appropriate guidance should be given to you by your physical therapist before any extensive travel. Working as a team, you and your therapist can design a plan to promote movement, prevent pain and make your travel much more comfortable and enjoyable.