



## Ears, Altitude and Airplane Travel

Ear problems are the most common medical complaint of airplane travelers. The American Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS), the national association of physicians who treat the ear, nose, throat and related areas, offers the following tips to avoid ear discomfort during air travel.

Swallow or yawn. This activates the muscle that opens the Eustachian tube, which connects the back of the nose with the middle ear. Avoid sleep during descent. You may not swallow enough to keep up with pressure changes. Chewing gum or sucking on hard candy may help.

Unblock your ears by using the following method:

- 1 Pinch your nostrils shut
- 2 Take a mouthful of air
- 3 Use your cheek and throat muscles to force the air into the back of your nose as if you were trying to blow your thumb and fingers 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 a bottle or pacifier to suck and do not allow him to 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.

If your ears fail to open or pain persists, you may need to seek the help of your otolaryngologist.

**\*WARNING:** Decongestant tablets and sprays should be avoided by persons with heart disease, high blood pressure, irregular heart rhythms, thyroid disease, or excessive nervousness.