

Condé Nast Traveler

How to Pop Your Ears on a Plane: 9 Tricks for Relieving Ear Pressure, According to Medical Experts

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It's one of those everyday annoyances of air travel: As the plane ascends or descends, the cabin pressure changes and leaves you wondering how to pop your ears during a flight.

This phenomenon is sometimes known as airplane ear. According to the Mayo Clinic, it results from an imbalance in air pressure between the air pressure inside the cabin of the airplane, and the pressure in your middle ear. This difference can happen during rapid changes in altitude and the resulting discomfort is something most air travelers have experienced.

"It's very common to get that ear fullness when on planes because of the change in air pressure," explains Dr. Kimberly Lee, a Los Angeles-based board-certified plastic surgeon and assistant clinical professor in the Division of Head and Neck Surgery at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "When the pressures on the inside and outside of the eardrum aren't the same, the eardrum acts like a suction cup causing the dreaded sensation of ear fullness and discomfort that makes you want to pop the ears."

The good news? Clearing your ears is usually quick and painless, and there are several expert-recommended tips and tricks to safely and easily keep discomfort at bay. Here's everything else

you need to know about why your ears pop in the first place, and how to pop your ears so you can stay pain-free for every flight.

Why do your ears pop on airplanes?

First, a little biology lesson. Airplane ear occurs when the air pressure in the middle ear and the air pressure in the environment don't match, preventing your eardrum (in science speak, it's the tympanic membrane) from vibrating normally. That's because the Eustachian tube, a narrow passage connected to the middle ear that regulates air pressure, can't keep up with the change in pressure quickly enough. As a result, you may experience airplane ear (*ear barotrauma* in medical terms).

Why can't I pop my ears?

One common reason ears just *won't* pop? Colds or allergies, which cause mucus membranes to become inflamed. That inflammation then causes the Eustachian tube to become clogged, making it unable to open and close properly. When this happens, at best, you'll probably be in some pain when you fly; at worst, you may rupture your eardrum or bleed into the space behind it. "The worse the cold is, the higher the risk that you end up with an ear problem," says Dr. Alicia M. Quesnel, an otologist and neurotologist at Massachusetts Eye and Ear. Some doctors recommend not flying with a stuffy nose—but avoiding travel isn't practical advice, especially during the holiday season (which also happens to coincide with flu season and the lingering pandemic).

Instead, attempt to limit your flight time. If you must travel with a cold, consider a nonstop flight instead of a connection whenever possible. "It's not the length of time you're flying that matters," Quesnel says. "It's how many times you're going up and down."

What is the easiest way to pop your ears?

1. Yawn or talk to open the mouth and activate the Eustachian tube.

Yawning or even talking can work well to ease mild discomfort. Even a fake yawn, where you simply mimic the wide stretching of the mouth, can do the trick.

With all of these actions, "you're opening and closing that tube," Quesnel says. "When you open and close that tube you're equalizing pressure with the outside world." Repeat every few minutes until you feel your ears pop.

2. Chew gum, swallow liquid, or suck on candy to change the pressure in your throat.

Keep a pack of gum handy and chew a piece before takeoff and landing, recommends Dr. Gary Snyder, a New York-based board-certified otolaryngologist. But not just any kind, Dr. Snyder

says: “Gum in general is a good idea, but mint gum causes extra saliva and extra swallowing, which can be better for the ears for plane flights.”

You can also pull double duty on hydration and keeping your ears clear by sipping on water or another liquid during takeoff and landing. Sucking on candy helps, too. These approaches are simple and effective: “Swallowing activates the muscles that open the Eustachian tube,” the [American Academy of Otolaryngology](#) says.

3. Try a long-acting nasal decongestant.

Many ENT specialists recommend using a long-acting nasal decongestant to offset any swelling that may be affecting your nasal passages and interfering with your Eustachian tube. Two common recommendations: 12-hour or 24-hour Sudafed or Afrin nasal spray. If you opt for the nasal spray, give yourself a spray 30 minutes before takeoff and again about 30 minutes prior to descent.

However, as Quesnel notes, “These medicines are not a cure-all, and you can still have problems. But you can optimize your ability to equalize pressure by taking a nasal spray.”

4. Try the Toynbee maneuver.

This ear-popping technique is simple but effective. Gently pinch your nose shut while simultaneously swallowing. If that doesn’t work ...

5. Try a version of the Valsalva maneuver.

Don’t worry, this breathing technique—which is sometimes recommended by medical professionals to help patients [slow down a too-fast heart rate](#) or assess problems with the autonomic nervous system—isn’t as complicated as it sounds. Here’s how to do it, according to WebMD: First, take a deep breath and hold it, then pinch your nose shut and close your mouth. Next, bear down (yes, like you’re trying to go to the bathroom) and while you’re bearing down, breathe out like you’re trying to blow up a balloon. This should do the trick, and if it doesn’t, you can repeat and try again, or alternate this with the Toynbee maneuver.

One caveat with both of these techniques: Blow gently. “If you blow too hard, it can generate enough pressure to create a hole in your eardrum, so only gently blow so that it’s not too forceful,” Lee advises.

6. Try to stay awake during takeoff and landing.

If you’re one of those passengers who is snoring before takeoff or [still snoozing](#) when the wheels hit the tarmac (or both), you may be more susceptible to airplane ear. That’s because when you’re asleep, you won’t be yawning, swallowing, chewing, or doing any of the other tricks that will help your ears pop naturally. As a result, you may just wake up with a painful

earache. But you can avoid this discomfort by staying away during takeoff and landing, and making sure your ears have popped.

7. Use specially designed earplugs to mitigate the rapid change in pressure.

Earplugs are an essential for many travelers to get a good night's sleep in unfamiliar surroundings, but they can also play a key role in helping ease the discomfort from popping ears. Specially designed to help regulate pressure in the ear, EarPlanes are a favorite among passengers. These hypoallergenic earplugs, which come in reusable and disposable versions, have a unique filter that regulates air pressure, which should help relieve discomfort.

8. Apply a heating pad or warm washcloth to your ear.

This is one you'll have to do when you arrive at your destination, but for stubbornly unpoped ears, try applying heat with a warm washcloth or heating pad to open up your Eustachian tubes. The heat should help unclog the tube, and allow it to release built-up ear pressure.

9. Get pressure equalization tubes implanted.

Sure, implants may sound severe, but if you suffer from pressure-related ear pain during every takeoff and landing (whether you have a cold or not), you might have Eustachian tube dysfunction. If you have this condition and you travel frequently, you might want to consider having pressure equalization tubes implants in your ears.

This simple, 10-minute procedure helps your ears drain fluid and regulate pressure. The implants last one to two years, and the procedure is typically performed in a doctor's office.

Pressure equalization tubes, however, are a last resort, as they can lead to ear infections and/or perforated ear drums. If you think you may suffer from Eustachian tube dysfunction, talk to your doctor about the implants.

How to ease ear discomfort in kids

If you're a parent, you're not just worried about how to pop your ears, but also how to relieve any ear pressure your child might be feeling, too. Those younger passengers who are wailing during takeoff and landing are likely feeling some serious discomfort, as the mechanisms in their little ears may still be developing. Fortunately, many of the same tips and tricks that apply to adults also can work for kiddos. For babies, breastfeeding or taking a bottle during takeoff and landing is a good way to keep the sucking mechanism going; a pacifier works, too. For older children, sucking on a lollipop or other hard candy or even gum can also help (just make sure you dispose of it properly!). And for the kiddos who don't mind earplugs, EarPlanes also makes a version especially designed for smaller ears.

Finally, if your child is suffering from a harsh cold or an ear infection, you may want to reconsider your trip—or, at the very least, prepare to deal with some additional discomfort. “Children with ear infections may experience more severe discomfort because oftentimes middle ear infections are associated with increased fluid accumulating in the middle ear space, which therefore exacerbates the pressure differential, ultimately causing increased pain,” explains Dr. Christina Johns, a pediatric emergency physician and senior medical advisor at PM Pediatric Care, which has locations across the United States.

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