

## **A Physical Therapist Offers Tips on Air Travel**

Complete Physical Therapy LLC supports the recent "Call to Action" by Acting Surgeon General Steven K Galson, MD, MPH to reduce the number of cases of deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism in the United States.

Blood clots, called deep vein thrombosis (DVT), can occur after periods of being immobile, such as on long plane flights. The risk of DVT increases during travel of 8 hours or more<sup>1</sup> and that an estimated 10 percent of passengers on long flights may develop a DVT.<sup>2</sup> 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.

Compression stockings<sup>2</sup> 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. 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. Simply getting up to go to the bathroom is a good way to work the leg muscles and ease the back – that is, if the captain has turned off the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign. Appropriate guidance should be given to you by your physical therapist before any extensive flying.

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,.

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 passengers should drink plenty of water before and during the flight.

At Complete Physical Therapy LLC, we work closely with patients in the home and at an out patient setting to return to physical activity as soon as possible. This can help prevent occurrence of a DVT. We are health care professionals who evaluate and manage individuals with medical problems or other health-related conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities. We promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability at home, at work and during leisure activities. This may include travel on an airplane.

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1. Aryal KR, Al-Khaffaf H. Venous thromboembolic complications following air travel: what's the quantitative risk? A literature review. *Eur J Vasc Endovasc Surg.* 2006;31:187-99.
2. Scurr JH, Machin SJ, Bailey-King S, Mackie IJ, McDonald S, Smith PD. Frequency and prevention of symptomless deep-vein thrombosis in long-haul flights: a randomised trial. *Lancet.* 2001;357:1485-9.