- Flight

Why does flying bring me down?

DOES A LONG FLIGHT LEAVE YOU FEELING EXHAUSTED? CAMILLA FOSTER LOOKS AT THE MANY REASONS WHY...

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A LONG flight often feels like the perfect opportunity to power through a backlog of emails or to finally finish a novel. However, this urge of productivity often dips for many of us as feelings of sluggishness begin to creep in.



To find out what's behind this mid-flight slump, we asked some experts to break down some key reasons why flying can leave us feeling so bloated and exhausted. They have also shared their top tips on how to prevent this.

DISRUPTS YOUR NORMAL ROUTINE

"When we are out of our usual routines on a flight, it disrupts what our bodies are used to," says Dr Asimah Hanif, NHS GP and medical expert working with travel insurance provider Staysure.

"For example, you might not be used to eating so early in morning when they serve breakfast on a plane, and you might be served something that you don't usually eat like an omelette.

"So, the impact of both of those elements combined – eating things that you're not used to and eating after the time frame that you usually would eat – can disrupt digestion and contribute to sluggishness." Dr Mark Austin, specialist in gastroenterology at Nuffield Health in Haywards Heath agrees and adds: "If you're flying at funny times of the day, that can have an impact on your physiological state, and can release stress hormones and make you feel less hungry, bloated and uncomfortable."

SLEEP DEPRIVATION

"Many of us struggle to get good quality sleep on a plane, and sleep deprivation has a huge impact on your digestion and how you feel," says Dr Austin.

ENVIRONMENT

“When you’re flying at altitude, the air cabin pressure will change and you’ll also get lower oxygen levels, which in turn could affect your digestion and your energy levels,” says Dr Hanif. “In addition, the cabin air is conditioned, but it’s also quite dry, so people will often notice that their skin becomes dry and might feel dehydrated, which can also contribute to fatigue.”

ALCOHOL

“We have to be careful about drinking while flying at altitude, as the effects of alcohol can be heightened and have a very negative impact on you,” says Dr Austin. “We often see people on the news who suddenly become uncontrollable, irrational or difficult to manage when they have been drinking on a plane. “Alcohol causes dehydration, sleep disturbances and can also have a significant impact on the muscles at the lower end of the gullet, so it can increase your risk of things like reflux. “Plus, it’s a calorie load and that large volume of sugar can cause changes in your blood sugar levels, which can influence how your body is reacting to these situations.”

COFFEE

“When you’re travelling over time zones, your body can become incredibly confused about what time of day or night it is, and if you have caffeine, which is a stimulant, that can become very difficult and can actually prolong the impact of jet lag,” says Dr Austin.

AIRLINE FOOD

“Airline meals often contain a high level of salt and I’ve been told that this is because your taste is altered at altitude, so the airlines often compensate for that by adding in more salt to make it taste nice,” says Dr Hanif. “However, as a result, that can cause water retention and processing issues.”

Airline food is also often high in carbohydrates.

“The food is usually ultraprocessed and often involves things like pasta, rice and bread,” says Dr Austin. “They often don’t attain much fibre, but do have quite a lot of fat for taste and satiety. These types of foods fill you up and make feel you sleepy.”

SEDENTARY

“Sitting down for long periods reduces your general circulation, slows your metabolism and can impact general nutrient absorption,” highlights Dr Hanif.

Dr Austin adds: “People that are prone to slow gut transit and constipation need to get up and walk around, and if you’re not doing that for long periods of time, plus all the other factors that we’ve already mentioned, you’ve got a significant risk of problems with regards to slow gut transit and gas production. So, you might find that you get a lot of wind.”

DEHYDRATION

“Aeroplanes do run with very low humidity, so you’ve got a huge risk rate related to things like dehydration,” says Dr Austin. “Dehydration can trigger a stress

response where your body is trying to divert blood away from the organs that it doesn’t necessarily think are super important, which often includes your gut. This will cause problems related to digestion, gut transit, bloating and problems with regards to constipation.”

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