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How to manage motion sickness

Have you ever felt sick or dizzy in a moving vehicle? Perhaps you've also broken out in a cold sweat, felt weak, or developed a headache at the same time? Motion sickness may be common, but this doesn't mean you can't prevent or treat it.

Why am I getting motion sickness?

Motion sickness – also called travel sickness – can affect anyone, and most people have experienced it at some point in their lives. This is especially true during childhood. In fact, some studies suggest that more than 40% of children get motion sick in a car or on a bus¹.

Why does this happen? It's all to do with the signals that are sent to your brain while you're in motion. The unusual movements you feel while travelling send lots of messages to the brain, including from mechanisms in your inner ear that send information about your position.

However, your eyes can contradict these messages if they're focused on objects that aren't moving, like the inside of a car. This results in a confusing mix of messages, and it's this confusion that causes motion sickness.

How to stop motion sickness

You might be particularly vulnerable to motion sickness. Scientists aren't clear why it can affect some more than others, but this doesn't mean that you can't prevent, ease, or eradicate this unpleasant and inconvenient sensation. The techniques below are usually highly effective and most are non-medical.

1. Eat light before your travel

If you know that you're heading on a car journey, catching the bus, boarding a plane or boat, or riding a fairground ride, be mindful of what you eat and when. Alcohol and heavy meals – especially fatty and spicy food – can upset your stomach, making motion sickness worse. Instead, opt for light meals at least an hour before travelling to give your food time to digest.

2. Plan where you sit

In a vehicle, where you position yourself matters. Always try and face forward and sit as far away as possible from the jittering movements and potent smells of an engine.

To keep motion to a minimum in a:

- **Car** – sit in the front.
- **Bus** – sit by a window.
- **Train** – sit forward-facing by a window.
- **Boat** – sit on the upper deck in the middle.
- **Plane** – sit over the wing.

3. Break long car journeys up

If you're planning a long car journey, it's a good idea to take regular breaks. Getting out the car and taking a short walk in the fresh air gives your brain a break from the mixed signals its receiving about your movement and balance.

4. Put down that book or electronic screen

Focussing your eyes on something that isn't moving while other mechanisms are sensing that you're in motion is a big trigger for motion sickness. This is why many people find they can't read books or watch films for long before feeling sick. Avoid too much electronic screen time – even when you're not travelling, screen scrolling can trigger something similar to motion sickness called cybersickness².

5. Find different stimulants in the vehicle

How else can you entertain yourself? Looking forward at a fixed point, like a horizon, may help prevent motion sickness, but if you need more mental stimulation, you could try listening to music, a podcast, or an audio book with your eyes closed. Not only will this avoid sending confusing signals from your eyes to your brain, but sounds may also distract your brain and reduce sensitivity to these signals.

6. Rest your eyes

If you find resting easy while on the move, keeping your eyes closed is one of the most effective ways to halt the symptoms of motion sickness. Sleeping is even better - alongside shutting off signals from your eyes to your brain, a sleeping brain may also be able to ignore some of the disruptive motion signals it's receiving.

7. Locate fixed points outside the vehicle

When looking out a window or on a boat deck, fix your gaze on something that isn't moving. Watching trees and other cars go by outside a window - or waves roll by on a boat deck - can make motion sickness worse. That isn't to say that you should avoid gazing out altogether - if you feel seasick inside a boat, stepping out onto the deck and finding a fixed point on the horizon can help rectify the mismatch of signals in your brain that tell you you're moving without a visual reference³.

8. Breathe in fresh air

When travelling by road, rail, or seadrink in fresh air as often as possible. Usually, this means sitting by an open window - but be careful to avoid strong petrol or diesel fumes.

9. Focus on your breathing

Some studies show that diaphragmic breathing - taking deep and slow breathes in and out - can help ease the unpleasant side effects of travelling⁴. It's a simple enough technique, but you can learn the most effective way to do it [here](#).

10. Soothe an unsettled tummy

When it comes to treating motion sickness, what you feed your tummy matters. Taking small sips of cold water can help. Some natural food flavourings can also settle your stomach and relieve symptoms:

- [Ginger flavoured snacks or drinks](#) – effective for all symptoms of motion sickness⁵.
- [Peppermint flavoured snacks or drinks](#) – have a numbing and calming effect that helps ease nausea and headaches⁶.

11. Try over-the-counter medicines

If these natural techniques aren't enough, your local pharmacy will have motion sickness medicine. This ranges from homeopathic remedies, like acupressure wrist bands, to tablets and patches that usually contain the ingredients hyoscine and [antihistamines](#). Hyoscine is considered the most effective medicine for motion sickness.

If you're getting medicine for your child, ask your pharmacist which brands are suitable for children, and about any side effects.

When to see a doctor for motion sickness

In nearly all cases, motion sickness naturally stops once your journey is over. You should visit your doctor if:

- You're still experiencing symptoms long after the journey has ended.
- You feel like you have motion sickness when you haven't been moving.
- You're experiencing other symptoms like chest pain or hearing loss.

Your doctor can work out if your motion sickness is particularly severe and may be able to prescribe [stronger medicines](#). They can also investigate if your symptoms are a sign of another health problem that needs addressing.

Further reading

1. [Henriques et al: Motion sickness prevalence in school children.](#)
2. [Iowa State University: Screen time can make you feel sick – here are ways to manage cybersickness.](#)
3. [The Vision Therapy Center: The surprising reason why you suffer from motion sickness.](#)

4. Stromberg et al: Diaphragmatic breathing and its effectiveness for the management of motion sickness.
5. Nunes et al: Clinical evaluation of the use of ginger extract in the preventive management of motion sickness.
6. Mohr et al: Peppermint essential oil for nausea and vomiting in hospitalized patients: incorporating holistic patient decision making into the research design.

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