

Aerospace Medical Association

Medical Guidelines for Airline Travel

Reported In-flight Illness and Death

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Although there are no publicly available databases providing information on the number of in-flight medical emergencies or deaths, the few studies published in the literature indicate that they are uncommon. Minor illnesses such as near-fainting, dizziness, hyperventilation (1) do occur more frequently. However, serious illnesses, such as seizures and myocardial infarction, also occur.

Likewise, deaths are rare with one study reporting 0.31 in-flight deaths per million passengers (2). Another more recent study quote a death rate of 0.3% among all patients with in-flight medical emergencies. (3) A number of authors have suggested the adoption of an international standardized recording system for in-flight medical events, but after detailed consideration of such proposals, it was found that this would be a costly and logistically difficult task, and unlikely to result in practical benefits (4,5). A more practical and cost effective approach may be for individual State (country) regulatory aviation authorities to consider the topic with the airlines they regulate and ask them to submit in-flight medical event data in an agreed format. Although this would impose some costs on the regulatory authority and on the airlines, reporting systems already exist for safety related events and it may be feasible to modify these to record health related events.

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