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Flying healthy, from takeoff past landing

Here are the keys to flying long distances without catching your fellow passengers' colds and flu, or developing other health problems while airborne

BY JANE E. BRODY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Two decades ago on a midwinter flight from New York to Chile en route to Antarctica, more than a dozen fellow travelers and I came down with bronchitis. When the Antarctic voyage got under way, so many people were sick that the ship's doctor nearly ran out of antibiotics.

Since that trip, I have diligently followed a preventive routine whenever I fly.

* I prepare far enough in advance to be sure I am well rested and minimally stressed when I leave.

* Just before the flight I take echinacea and 1,000 milligrams of vitamin C. (The immunity-boosting powers of these supplements are still much debated, but they seem to work for me.)

* During the flight I drink lots of water — but no alcohol and minimal caffeine — to keep protective membranes well hydrated.

* I wash my hands often and keep them away from my eyes and nose.

Though I can cite no studies that endorse my routine, I have never again become ill from flying — and I fly dozens of times a year, sometimes halfway around the world. The regimen has also protected a former head of the Federal Aviation Agency, who would get pneumonia when he flew from New York to Colorado or Australia to visit his sons.

I also take precautions to prevent blood clots, which is a special concern because I am short. In addition to staying well hydrated, I always book an aisle seat so I can get up easily and walk around at least once an hour. On very long flights, I wear compression stockings.

Each year nearly 2 billion people travel aboard commercial airlines. Yet as two experts in emergency medicine noted in February in *The Lancet*, "Many passengers are unaware of health implications associated with commercial air travel."

Data on in-flight medical problems are limited, and no one keeps track of how many people become sick from flights after they leave the airplane. But the experts, Danielle Silverman of Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, and Mark Gendreau of the Lahey Clinic Medical Center in Burlington, Massachusetts, maintain that flight risks to health are rising because "the age of travelers is increasing, and long-haul aircrafts, such as the Airbus A380 and Boeing 777LR, are capable of extending flight times to 18-20 hours."

Older passengers are more likely to have health problems that can be aggravated by air travel, especially on long flights. Infectious diseases known to have been spread to people of all ages by air travel include influenza, severe acute respiratory syndrome (or SARS) and tuberculosis, not to mention the common cold.

Several factors can affect the health of airline passengers, including changes in cabin pressure that reduce oxygen supply; immobility and dehydration that raise the risk of blood clots for all passengers, not just those in the tighter space of economy class; exposure to passengers with infectious diseases; and jet lag when crossing multiple time zones. Flight crews also face chronic exposure to cosmic radiation, which is a hazard for pregnant women as well.

Some commercial airlines have taken steps to minimize health risks and their consequences, like offering passengers plenty of water during flights and recommending exercises that keep blood from pooling in the legs. All flights carry

emergency medical kits, and most now also have an automatic defibrillator to rescue passengers whose hearts develop an erratic rhythm, which can be fatal within minutes.

But the bulk of any protection may depend on you, the passenger. If you have a chronic health problem, the *Lancet* authors suggest a preflight medical assessment to determine whether it is safe for you to fly and what precautions you should take if you do fly.

Airline cabins are commonly pressurized to altitudes of 1,524m to 2,438m above sea level. Healthy people have no problem at such altitudes, but those with underlying heart or respiratory disease who may already have low levels of oxygen in their blood can develop symptoms of mountain sickness — fatigue, headache, light-headedness and nausea. Those passengers may need supplementary oxygen when flying, the doctors wrote.

Even healthy passengers may develop mild abdominal cramps and ear problems as gas in body cavities expands with rising altitudes. The doctors warned against flying too soon after surgery, and they cautioned scuba divers against flying within 12 hours of a dive (24 hours for those who do several dives a day), lest they develop decompression sickness.

The risk of blood clots starts to rise four hours into a flight and peaks on flights of more than eight hours. Flying business class offers no protection, despite the expanded leg room, research has shown. The more flights taken within two weeks, the greater the risk. Passengers who are obese, have cancer, recently had surgery, take oral contraceptives or have conditions that raise their susceptibility to blood clots (including genetic conditions like factor V Leiden) are at particular risk of flight-induced clots. Many may benefit from blood thinners when flying.

On long flights, the less that passengers move about the cabin and the less water they consume, the greater the risk. Wearing compression stockings and exercising the calf muscle during the flight can lower the risk.

While exposure to cosmic radiation is not considered a problem even for frequent air travelers unless they are pregnant, anyone can develop jet lag from abrupt changes in multiple time zones. After a westward flight, it can take a day to adjust for every time zone crossed; after an eastward flight, a day and a half.

Although controlling exposure to sunlight is the best way to limit jet lag, it can be challenging for some travelers, so the doctors recommend taking melatonin (0.5 to 5 milligrams). When flying eastward, try to get morning light (wear sunglasses only in the afternoon) and take melatonin at the desired bedtime. When flying westward, get afternoon light (wear sunglasses only in the morning) and take melatonin in the morning. And in either direction, be sure to stay well hydrated.

To prevent contagious illnesses, the most important measure is to be sure all your immunizations are up to date, including annual flu shots. The *Lancet* authors noted that the "risk of onboard transmission of infection is mainly restricted to individuals with either close personal contact or seated within two rows" of an infected passenger.

But since there may be no way to know who sitting near you might be infectious, my regimen should not hurt and may very well protect you.

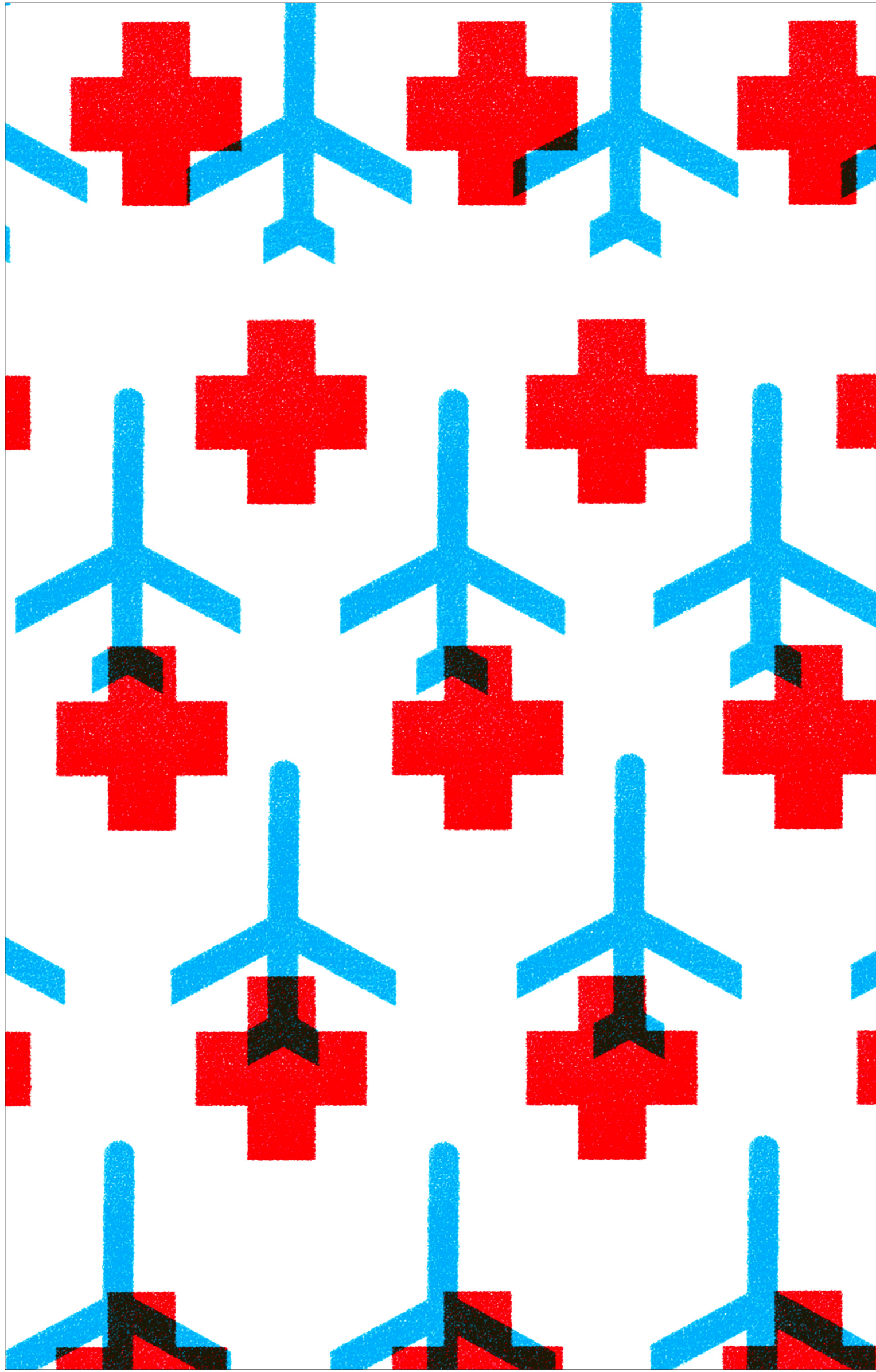


PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

England's Morris dancers fight back

Young practitioners are breathing new life into the traditional folk dance that was said to be facing extinction because it isn't hip enough

BY ALICE RITCHIE
AFP, NOTTINGHAM, ENGLAND

With their long socks, hats, white handkerchiefs and bells tied to their shins, Morris dancers have long been figures of fun in England — but a new generation is fighting back.

England's traditional folk dancing is thought to date back to at least the 14th century, although nobody quite knows where it originated, other than that it has been danced for hundreds of years by working men trying to earn a bit of extra cash.

The future of Morris was cast into doubt earlier this year when one of its senior officials warned it risks becoming "extinct" within 20 years because young people are too embarrassed to take part.

"There is no doubt some sides will die, and have died, because the youngsters haven't been encouraged to come in," Charlie Corcoran, the bagman (secretary) of the Morris Ring dance association, said.

But at a Morris festival in Nottingham, central England, last month, most dancers rejected this, arguing that while young people may not be dancing the traditional styles, they are reinterpreting Morris for the 21st century.

The Boggart's Breakfast troupe, from Sheffield in northern England, are far from the stereotype of

the bearded, middle-age men in white socks, both in appearance and the way they add modern twists and turns to the usual set-piece dances with sticks.

Although they wear the rag jackets of the Border dance style, which hails from the counties bordering Wales, these are black with blue and silver sequins, topped off with black trousers and top hats and bright blue painted faces.

"We formed with the intention of pushing the boundaries a little — we do a lot of fusion stuff, we use a lot of non-traditional tunes," says Grace Jackson, 34, who is originally from the US state of Vermont.

She said there was "not a chance" Morris was dying out, but admitted that dances with handkerchiefs were "a bit girly" and said it was vital to have groups who were "making it new and making it something for this generation."

Morris, usually danced by sets of four or six people, has long been a part of rural life across England, taking on regional variations.

Mill workers in the northwest danced in their work clogs, while coal miners in the northeast took the swords they used to scrape the mud off pit ponies to create intricate woven patterns in "Rapper" or "long sword" dances.

Many of the dances were written down for



Hook Eagle Morris Men dance in front of villagers during the annual Wassail night in Hartley Wintney, England. PHOTO: AFP

the first time in the early 20th century by music teacher Cecil Sharp, sparking a revival.

Nowadays, most of England's estimated 14,000 Morris dancers perform more than one style, to the music of either a single melodeon, a fiddle or a band.

It is no longer a male-only culture, and mixed sides are a common sight.

The Lord Conyers Morris Men have been

dancing for 35 years, but member John Ledbury admits the all-male side once looked as if they were dying out.

"We went through a stage where our average age went up by one each year," said the 62-year-old, whose troupe wear all white with brown and green baldricks (chest straps) and straw hats.

"Then there were various new generation people joining us and it brought it down with a bump, and it seems to have revitalized the dancing quite a bit."

Many Morris officials say there are young people dancing but many are embarrassed to perform anywhere that their friends may see them.

This is less of a problem with Rapper dancing, a highly-energetic sword dance performed by five people. It involves weaving flexible swords held at each end into intricate patterns, while deploying some deft footwork.

In the 13th-century Ye Old Salutation Inn in central Nottingham, Katherine Hurdley's troupe is young and slick. They wear dark red long shorts and shirts with black socks and belts, and dance quickly.

"It's fun, it's fast and there's a lot of team friendships," the 20-year-old said. Her group Triskele, from Sheffield, perform set dances but

she adds: "There's always new things you can do with it, and everyone has an input."

Across the city, Rebecca Kell, 25, insists the tradition and community spirit is an important part of the appeal — along with keeping active and of course the drinking, given that much of Morris dancing revolves around pubs.

"We want to be proud of it, it's English culture, but mainly its fun and there's a big folk family around the country," she said.

In the city center, some of Morris' youngest devotees from Ashley's Rise in Bristol, southwest England, performed Border dances in colorful rag jackets, bells and sticks.

Tom, 15, says Morris dancing is "just brilliant," while 10-year-old Courtenay admitted: "I really like banging sticks together."

But skeptical teenage onlookers suggest Morris still has a serious image problem that it needs to overcome both to survive and to fulfill its hopes of taking part in the opening ceremony for the London 2012 Olympics.

"I'm quite an eclectic dresser but I think even that's pushing it for me," said Daniel Joss, 16, as he eyed up the rag jackets.

"Some things are just unacceptable for people my age."