

# Exercise and Air Travel

**Angela Stock, DPT**  
**Doctor of Physical Therapy**  
**Andover Physical Therapy**

As summer quickly approaches more and more people are planning vacations. If you are one of those who will be traveling by airplane, here are some helpful tips to help get you through that flight.

We all know that airlines offer you as little leg room as possible, and this tends to get a little uncomfortable if your travel destination is two or more hours away. Aside from the general aching and cramping in feet and legs experienced by most airline travelers, you may also experience swelling in feet and legs after sitting for several hours at a time. A more serious condition, although considerably more rare, is the potential to develop blood clots in legs after spending long periods of time in a cramped seat. While the majority of blood clots formed during a flight are small and will dissolve quickly on their own, the potential exists of forming larger clots which could lead to serious health problems. If you have a history of blood clots, consult your physician before flying.

There are steps you can take to avoid any cramping, swelling, and possible clotting during air travel. The most important thing you can do is to not stay seated for the entire flight. Of course wait until the captain has turned off the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign and get up and walk a little every hour of your flight. This will help to stretch cramped muscles and stimulate overall circulation. You can also perform exercise while you are seated including:

**Toe and heel raises** - Start with feet flat on the floor. Lift heels so that only toes are touching the floor and hold for 5 seconds. Then return to start positions and lift toes off the floor so only the heels are touching and hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 10 times.

**Ankle exercises** - Lift foot off the ground and perform circles in the air clockwise and then counter clockwise. You can also pump the foot up and down or side to side. Using your big toe as a pen, you can draw the alphabet by moving your foot and ankle.

**Seated marching** - if room allows it, pick each knee up from a seated position as if you were marching.

**Upper body stretches** - lift arms above head and lean to the left and then right. If you are too close to your neighbor you can do this one standing in the aisle as well.

**Back stretches** - while seated use your right arm to grab the left arm rest and rotate your upper body as far as comfortable. Repeat on the other side.

If you have a history of low back pain, you may want to place a carry-on bag under the seat in front of you and use it as a foot rest to elevate your knees a little higher than your hips. It is also important to drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration which may lead to further cramping.