

Have Bump Can Still Fly

As long as you're having a straightforward pregnancy, there's no reason why you shouldn't jet off for a last holiday before your baby arrives. **MH** gives you the lowdown and the skyhigh on flying with a bump.

WORDS MARIE KREFT
PHOTOGRAPHY ERIC CHUN
ART DIRECTION JANET KOH & SEOW KAI LUN



Generally, commercial air travel during pregnancy is considered safe for women who have healthy pregnancies. Studies show that for most passengers there is no increased risk in flying, however flying is still probably the form of travel which raises most anxiety.

When should I fly?

All airlines give a cut-off date for pregnant passengers – mainly because they don't want you going into labour mid-air. For many airlines this means no flying beyond the 36th week of pregnancy (calculated by your due date) or, if you're expecting twins or more, beyond your 32nd week. Check with your chosen airline. After these dates, some airlines may consider urgent medical or compassionate cases, but only at their discretion.

If you're between 29 weeks and 36 weeks of pregnancy (again, check your airline's specific policy), you will need a medical certificate confirming your

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fitness to travel, how far along in the pregnancy you are, and your estimated date of delivery. While this is for your wellbeing, Dr Chua Yang, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at A Clinic For Women, suggests a second reason for the letter: "I hear sometimes the concern may not be the actual fitness to fly but customs need to know the 'baby bump' is genuine and not hiding anything!"

If you're flying out when you're around 28 weeks pregnant, make sure you have the letter ready for your return journey.

Airlines rely on you to declare your good news at the time of booking. "But you never asked!" shouted in despair between contractions probably won't work at the check-in desk when the staff refuse to let you through.

One more thing to note: if you're going on an all-inclusive trip, it might not be obvious which airline you're flying with, so be sure to check with your travel operator.

As for the best time to travel, many women find their second trimester is ideal. Dr Chua says: "Travelling may be easier without the first trimester symptoms like morning sickness or tiredness or poor appetite, even inability to hydrate due to intolerance to water. The pregnancy is also not too advanced to make travelling difficult due to heaviness, nor is there too high a risk for premature labour."

Where shall I go?

You might not want to travel anywhere that is malarial or requires vaccinations – and be aware that some countries restrict entry for non-national pregnant women. If you're unsure, check with your embassy in the country you'd like to visit.

Otherwise, be guided by your time, energy, budget and sense of adventure...

What should I do in advance?

Tell your gynaecologist of your travel plans. Dr Chua says there are certain groups of women for whom checking with a doctor is especially important.

"Women who have increased risks for deep vein thrombosis (DVT) have even higher risks during pregnancy and long flights. Sitting down long hours and relative dehydration just may be the last straw to developing a clot in the veins and the life-threatening condition."

She adds: "Mummies at risk of premature deliveries should not get on a long flight in case labour starts mid-air! Delivering without obstetric or neonatal services - even detouring the plane to any other place which may still not have adequate immediate medical care - is really undesirable."

Check your travel insurance: will it cover you if you need pregnancy-related medical attention or go into labour overseas? If you have an annual policy, tell your insurer about your change in circumstances.

When packing, set aside loose clothing for your flight and [in case your feet swell in the air] comfy shoes. To remove any remaining scrap of glamour you could also buy below-the-knee compression stockings (also known as flight socks) to reduce your risk of DVT.

If you're suffering from nausea, take some travel sweets.

Are the airport metal detectors safe?

Yes, they are safe, says Dr Chua. "Airport scanners are not x-ray machines and only produce a low-frequency electromagnetic field which is not a health issue for pregnant women."



Dr Lim Min Yu, associate consultant at NUH Women's Centre, agrees. "Airports around the world are introducing full body scanners because of security concerns", he says. "The American College of Radiology reports a traveller would have to have more than one thousand scans in a year to reach the effective dose of radiation equal to one chest x-ray. In fact, an airline passenger flying across the United States is exposed to more radiation from the flight than from screening by one of these devices. Therefore pregnant women can safely undergo a scanner screening."

What should I be aware of during check-in?

It might be good to tell the check-in staff you're pregnant and ask their advice on where you should sit. Taking an aisle seat would avoid embarrassing climbing-over-stranger situations when you need to pee every half an hour. It also makes it easier for you to stand up and stretch your legs regularly.

Bulkhead seats (next to bulkhead partitions that divide up the plane) may give you more legroom, and there will be no passenger in front of you to recline into your bump.

Exit row seats would also give you more space to stretch out, but be aware that in an emergency you may be required to lift the heavy door.

If you're feeling queasy you may not want to sit near the galley due to food smells.

Is it safe to wear the seatbelt?

You might worry that a seatbelt will squash your tummy, but due to the potential for air turbulence it's much safer to wear it than not. Dr Chua suggests keeping it "comfortably buckled, preferably below the bump". Some airlines may offer seatbelt extenders if you need more room.

What else can I do to make the flight comfortable?

The air in aircraft cabins is dry so it's good to drink plenty of water during your flight. You're probably already watching your caffeine intake but you may wish to avoid caffeine completely to avoid dehydration or messing up your sleep patterns.

When it comes to food, be guided by what you fancy. Small, regular snacks might be easier on your stomach than heavy meals. Try to avoid lots of salt as it encourages water retention.

And just relax! As you'll know if you have children already, life is about to get much, much busier ... so pop in your earphones, recline your seat (unless this annoys the stranger behind you) and enjoy your flight. ■

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