

# Research identifies in-flight emergencies

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Fainting is the most common in-flight medical emergency. Research recently published in BioMed Central's open access journal *Critical Care* details the number, type and frequency of medical emergencies on board two airlines.

Michael Sand led a team of researchers from the University of Bochum, Germany, and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), who analysed 10,189 different emergencies. He said, "Although in-flight medical emergencies are rare in general, they can have a significant effect on other passengers and crew, potentially with operational implications for the flight. The breakdown of the various medical emergencies encountered in our study showed that fainting was by far the most frequent medical condition, followed by stomach upsets, and heart conditions".

In all, the authors found 5307 cases of fainting (53.5%), 926 cases of gastrointestinal problems (8.9%) and 509 cases related to a cardiac condition (4.9%). The highly publicized problem of thrombosis accounted for a very small number of cases, although they do occur most often after a flight, rather than during. According to the authors, "Surgical illnesses accounted for a minor percentage of all on-board emergencies. There were 47 cases of thrombosis (0.5%), 27 appendicitis cases (0.25%) and just one case of gastrointestinal bleeding (less than 0.1 %). There were two births and 52 deaths".

The authors highlight that there are major problems with record keeping about in-flight emergencies. Out of 32 airlines approached to take part,

27 did not have the data available, one had data that was unsuitable and two refused to take part due to company policy. Sand said, "Standardization of in-flight medical emergency reporting is necessary for further larger studies to be conducted, as the current quality of data is poor".

The limited scope of the data available makes it difficult to make strong recommendations based on the information, but the authors do note that not all of the airlines had defibrillators as part of their medical flight kits. Sand said, "Considering the fact that cardiac conditions were the third most common condition seen in this study, patients with cardiac irregularities may profit from an on-board automatic external defibrillator. The same is true for patients with a suspected myocardial infarction."

Source: BioMed Central

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