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Epidemiology

In-flight medical emergencies rare, usually attended by medical volunteers

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By Rob Goodier

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Airlines carry about 2.75 billion passengers per year, but in-flight medical emergencies likely afflict only 16 passengers per million, a new study has found.

In more than 70% of cases, doctors, nurses or paramedics on board volunteer to assist. The most common complaints are fainting (syncope and presyncope), respiratory issues, and nausea and vomiting, according to results from an ongoing effort to characterize the nature of in-flight emergencies.

"The incidence of serious in-flight medical emergencies is low and most are safely handled with expert physician consultation done via radio or satellite phone," Dr. Drew Peterson, who led the study at the University of Pittsburgh's Emergency Medicine department, told Reuters Health by email.

Dr. Peterson and his team presented their preliminary results January 13 at the annual meeting of the National Association of EMS Physicians in Tucson, Arizona.

Using data from five large international and domestic airlines on radio or satellite calls from flight crews to consulting doctors at medical centers, they found 11,920 in-flight emergencies out of 744 million passengers in a nearly-three-year period.

Syncope and presyncope accounted for 37.5% of the calls, followed by respiratory issues at 12.1%, and nausea and vomiting at 9.5%.

Of the nearly 11,000 patients on which the researchers reported outcomes, 6.5% required an emergency diversion of the aircraft, 25.7% went to a hospital after landing, 8.4% were admitted and 0.3% resulted in death.

"This abstract is one of the first to identify the incidence of these medical emergencies," Dr. Jon Studnek, Director of Prehospital Research at Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, told Reuters Health. "Research such as this is important for the development of policies and protocols surrounding the response to in-flight emergencies."

Dr. Studnek, who was not involved in the study, added, "In-flight medical emergencies are a rare but costly event."

To respond well to these emergencies, Dr. Peterson, says, "Airlines should have formal plans, training and resources to handle the most common and life-threatening in-flight medical emergencies. Expert

physician consultation from a center utilizing these findings will help ensure that passengers get timely and appropriate medical care if needed, while decreasing unnecessary aircraft diversions for minor emergencies.

"Such resources can also help volunteer health professionals who render assistance during a commercial flight but who may not have experience handling emergencies in this setting," he added.

The researchers continue to analyze their data and they aim to provide new information on which cases may require emergency diversion or further patient care, Dr. Peterson says.

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