

Oxygen blood levels dip during commercial flights

Sep 19 (Reuters Health) - Oxygen blood levels decrease significantly not only during long-distance commercial flights but also during short-distance flights, according to results of a study presented here on Sunday at the European Respiratory Society 12th Annual Congress.

Blood oxygen levels drop on average 10% during long- distance flights. This fall is not dependent on the make of the aircraft, Portuguese investigators announced. The oxygen levels fall 3% on average during short-distance flights.

"These changes seems to be well-tolerated in healthy individuals but may be dangerous for patients with respiratory disease," Dr. Joao Carlos Winck, the presenting author, told meeting attendees.

Using continuous pulse oxymetry analysis, researchers at Hospital Sao Joao, Porto, Portugal, evaluated 20 healthy individuals in a series of transatlantic and European commercial flights.

A typical long-distance flight was from Europe to North America--for example departing from Lisbon airport and arriving at Newark or from Paris to Los Angeles--while short-distance flights studied by Winck's team occurred within Europe.

"Repetitive, more than 4% rapid oxygen desaturations, should not occur in a healthy individual but we observed an average of 3.1 of these dips during the long- distance flights," Winck said.

One finding was that the blood oxygen levels varied in different parts of the aircraft, reaching the lowest levels when the participants were inside the bathrooms.

"Real flight effects on oxygenation need further clarifications. Similar studies are needed to assure the effects of real flights in patients with respiratory failure," he added.

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