

Health Promotion

Gastroenteritis and Inflight incapacitation

Gastroenteritis is a common condition causing diarrhoea and vomiting. It is the most common cause of in-flight impairment in aircrew in Hong Kong. Usually the condition is caused by a viral or bacterial infection in contaminated food and drink, or contact with an infected person or surface. The risk of contracting infection is greatest in an inbound flight of which the crew may be not familiar with the hygiene condition of the country from which they return. Incidents of in-flight gastroenteritis in aircrew can present a significant incapacitation risk resulting in a medical emergency and the need to divert an aircraft, especially when a considerable number of aircrew is being affected.

To a certain extent, the risk of occurrence can be minimized. It is important to wash your hands with soap after using the toilet and before handling food or drink. Alcohol hand gels are not always effective for hands with visible dirt. Avoidance from eating high risk foods especially when down-route can minimize the risk. The high risk food include: cold meat and fish dishes in warm climates; shellfish, molluscs and oysters; food that is under-cooked or not reheated thoroughly; salads, including rice and pasta salads, and berries; raw fruit and vegetables (these should be washed and peeled if eaten raw); foods which contain milk, cream or ice-cream; any bottled or canned drink delivered with a broken seal; ice; freshly squeezed juices and fresh herbs (including in drinks), etc.

It is advisable to drink bottled water in high risk areas e.g. Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Central and South America and follow company policy on eating crew meals.

The common presentation of gastroenteritis includes: nausea, vomiting, fainting, sudden diarrhoea, stomach cramps, and a mild fever and can last several days. If one has any of the symptoms listed above, one should not fly.

If the above occurs down-route, one can drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration; take small sips, often. Drink bottled water if down-route One can use special rehydration sachets if available to replace important electrolytes, as well as water. Taking rest in the hotel is important. One should consider seeking medical advice if there is no improvement or the symptoms deteriorated.

If one develops symptoms in-flight, one should report one's symptoms to the other member(s) of the flight crew immediately, even if one does not yet have vomiting or diarrhoea. Not reporting the above can compromise the safety of everyone onboard. One also arranges to be relieved from duty if this is possible or be stood down at the end of the sector if not. It is better to have a sick bag available to avoid vomiting on flight controls/central console. The impairment with gastroenteritis should be treated in the same way as other medical emergencies and pilot incapacitations, in the context with the standard procedures of one's employer for incapacitation events