Motion (Travel) Sickness

Motion or travel sickness is very common and can make you feel sick or vomit. It is caused by repeated unusual movements, usually when travelling by car, boat, plane or train. There are effective treatments available, both from your doctor and the pharmacist. Ideally, medicines should be taken before the journey is started.

What is motion sickness?
Motion sickness (travel sickness) is common, especially in children. It is caused by repeated unusual movements during travelling. These repeated movements, such as going over bumps or round in a circle, send lots of messages to your brain. Your balance mechanisms in your inner ear feel different signals to those that your eyes are seeing which then sends your brain mixed, confusing messages. This then causes the symptom of nausea (feeling sick). Other symptoms you may experience include sweating, drooling saliva, headaches, feeling cold and going pale.

Motion sickness can also be triggered by anxiety or strong smells, such as food or petrol. Sometimes trying to read a book or a map can trigger motion sickness.

Motion sickness is more common in children and also in women. Fortunately, many children grow out of having motion sickness. It is not known why some people develop motion sickness more than others. Symptoms can develop in cars, trains, planes and boats, and on fairground rides, etc. Symptoms typically go when the journey is over, but not always. In some people they last a few hours, or even days, after the journey ends.

How can motion sickness be prevented?
Some general tips to avoid motion sickness include:

- Keep motion to a minimum. For example, sit in the front of a car, over the wing of a plane, on deck in the middle of a boat.
- Breathe fresh air if possible. For example, open a car window.
- Close your eyes and try to sleep.
- Do not read or watch a film.
- It is advisable not to stare at moving objects such as waves or other cars. Instead, look ahead, a little above the horizon, at a fixed place.
- Avoid heavy meals or alcohol before, and during, travelling. It may also be worth avoiding spicy or fatty food.

What is the treatment for motion sickness?
There are several medicines available which can reduce, or prevent, symptoms of motion sickness. You can buy them from pharmacies or get them on prescription. They work by interfering with the nerve signals described above. Although they are best taken before the journey, they still may help even if you take them after symptoms have begun.

Some medicines used for motion sickness may cause drowsiness. It is advisable not to drive or operate heavy machinery if you have taken them. In addition, some medicines may interfere with alcohol or other medication; your doctor or the pharmacist can advise you about this.

Hyoscine
This is the most effective medicine for motion sickness. It works by preventing the confusing nerve messages going to your brain. There are several brands of medicines which contain hyoscine and they come as a soluble form for children. You should take a dose 30-60 minutes before a journey and the effect can last up to 72 hours. One product (only available on prescription) comes as a patch for people aged 10 years or over. You stick this on to the skin behind the ear 5-6 hours before the journey and remove it at the end of the journey. This releases hyoscine into the bloodstream. Side-effects of hyoscine are uncommon but include dry mouth, drowsiness and blurred vision.

Antihistamines
These medicines can also be useful, although they are not quite as effective as hyoscine. However, they usually cause fewer side-effects. There are several types of antihistamine. Some cause drowsiness - for example, promethazine, which may be of use for young children on long journeys. Older children or adults may prefer one that is less likely to cause drowsiness - for example, cinnarizine or cyclizine.

Alternative treatments
Can be useful and used with medicines:

- On long journeys, it may be worth breaking the journey to have some fresh air, drink some cold water and if possible, take a short walk.
- One technique that has been shown to work in a clinical trial is to breathe deeply and slowly and, while focusing on your breathing, listen to music.
- Ginger can improve motion sickness in some people. It can be eaten in a biscuit or as crystallised ginger, drunk as tea or taken as tablets before a journey.

Further reading & references