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THE ELDERLY PASSENGER

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Background: Worldwide, airlines transport more than 3 billion passengers each year. The number of aging and elderly travelers is increasing, challenging airports and airlines to respond to the physical and psychological needs of this important group of travelers. Physicians and airline personnel may be increasingly confronted with questions and risks of patients who set off for air travel, despite chronic diseases and/or use of medication. Beyond the age of 60 cardiovascular risks increase and there is accelerated deterioration in capabilities which can restrict mobility, confuse the senses and impair cognitive function. This can make airport terminals and airline flights particularly challenging for many elderly citizens.

Problem: A survey among 230 Dutch General Practitioners showed that 80% of them had no knowledge of the physical characteristics of the in-flight environment and their (patho-) physiological effects on passengers. This allows the conclusion that many physicians will not be aware of the environmental and mental stresses of air travel and elderly passengers may be ill-prepared for travel.

Summary: This presentation is aimed at discussing the challenges of air travel for elderly passengers with chronic diseases, medication, anxiety, and lack of ability to adapt to change whether or not caused by (early) dementia. It is recommended to incorporate key principles of aviation medicine in the curriculum of the basic medical education and stimulate the awareness of physicians, elderly passengers, and airport and airline management concerning the specific problems of elderly passengers. It will be discussed whether some form of pre-travel consultation should be introduced in order to facilitate a smooth journey for the elderly and to reduce problems for airports and airlines.