CONCERN ABOUT DEEP VEIN thrombosis (DVT), a potentially life-threatening disorder in which blood clots form in the deep veins of the body, particularly the legs, has been growing in recent years after several cases were attributed to long flights. DVT can lead to a pulmonary embolism (PE), when a clot breaks free and lodges in a lung. If the clot is large enough, it can cause sudden death.

In an airplane, the dehydration caused by the dry air may thicken blood. In addition, the low cabin pressure, combined with immobility in cramped seats, may cause blood to collect in the legs. As a result, DVT has been dubbed “economy class syndrome.” The potential for the problem is greater when in-flight airline personnel keep the seat belt sign lighted and discourage passengers from moving about the cabin due to air turbulence.

Who Is Most Susceptible?
• People with cancer, chronic heart or respiratory failure, or an inherited or acquired predisposition to clotting, obesity or varicose veins
• Those who recently have had major surgery, have been bed-ridden or have suffered a blow to the leg
• Women who are pregnant, who’ve recently had a child, who are taking contraceptives or who are undergoing hormone replacement therapy
• People 40 years and older may also be at increased risk

Approximately 4 percent to 5 percent of high-risk individuals may suffer DVT on flights of 10 hours or more. Swelling, tenderness, discoloration or redness in the lower legs may be signs of DVT. Unfortunately, however, there are often no symptoms at all.

What Precautions Can You Take?
At the American Heart Association’s Scientific Sessions in 2001, the results of research conducted by an international group of scientists from the U.K., Australia and Italy suggested that low-to-medium risk patients may prevent DVT with compression stockings, while a single dose of heparin, a blood thinner, may work for high-risk individuals. Consult with your physician if you are concerned about DVT and to discuss how to best reduce your risk.

In addition, you can
• Walk around the cabin every 15 to 30 minutes if possible during flights of three hours or longer
• Do some simple stretching exercises while seated
• Sleep only for short periods— up to 30 minutes at a time
• Limit alcohol and caffeine, which may contribute to dehydration
• Bring your own water bottle, or request water if your flight has a beverage service
• Walk briskly through the airport during layovers

Compliments of:
Put your name and logo in this area, then make handout copies.

Source: KLM Royal Dutch Airlines

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at http://www.acefitness.org and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.

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