AIR TRAVEL AND COPD

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By 2008 it is projected that over two billion people will be travelling by commercial aircraft each year. With an ageing population and treatment improvements, many of these travellers will have lung disease, particularly COPD. Current guidelines as to whether a patient requires supplemental oxygen in-flight are based on limited research evidence. Awareness of the increased risk has resulted in recent scientific interest in this area.

Recent findings

Studies have demonstrated a lack of consistency in international guideline recommendations when performing assessments within the respiratory laboratory. This has led to more specific analysis of patients, including in-flight assessments, the inclusion of exercise stress and increased interest in actual cabin pressure conditions.

Summary

Commercial air travel is generally safe for patients with COPD when their disease is stable. All current guidelines reflect the considerable uncertainty in relation to the clinical circumstances where oxygen prescription during flight is essential. Currently planned flight outcome studies will provide more precise risk quantification.

Kev words

hypobaria, aircraft, hypoxia, in-flight