

Thematic Analysis of Social Media Discourse on Ear Pain in Aircraft Passengers

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Background: The volume of air travel continues to expand. Ear pain aboard aircraft occurs frequently in travellers. This qualitative analysis was designed to understand internet users' experience of otological symptoms associated with flying.

Materials and Methods: A focused search was conducted on the subreddit r/travel (<https://www.reddit.com/r/travel/>), a sub-forum of Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/>). The search process was repeated using various combinations of phrases. Data between January 2020 and December 2025 were extracted and coded by two independent researchers. Themes and sub-themes were generated iteratively using Braun and Clark's framework assisted by the mind-mapping software, Miro.

Results: At the time of writing, 390 entries were identified. The major themes were: (1) Help-seeking behaviour; (2) Opportunity for community support; and (3) Travel health literacy. Within these themes, seven sub-themes emerged: (1a) travel anxiety, stressors from previous experiences, pre-reading or family history; (1b) real-time advice, users seeking advice for active symptoms; (2a) sharing experience, sharing of own encounters to guide and reassure others; (2b) therapeutic advice, suggestion of over-the-counter medication, remedies, and practical tips; (3a) referral to healthcare, users sharing their diagnosis and encouraging others to seek medical advice; (3b) sharing personal treatment recommendations, these included non-pharmacological and pharmacological approaches; (3c) providing educational resources, users sharing online material for further learning.

Conclusion: This qualitative analysis has provided insights into how internet users utilise a popular social media platform to discuss travel-related health concerns. Further research into ear, nose and throat and travel medicine specialists' preventive advice for air passengers is warranted.