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What Causes Motion Sickness and How to Stop It Before It Starts

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | May 19, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Motion sickness is caused by a sensory mismatch between what your eyes see, what your inner ear detects, and how your brain interprets movement — triggering nausea, dizziness, and fatigue
- People with migraines, anxiety, or a family history of motion sickness are more likely to develop symptoms because of increased sensitivity in the brain's balance and nausea centers
- Long-term solutions like daily exposure therapy — used in astronaut and pilot training — rewire your nervous system and dramatically reduce or eliminate motion sickness over time
- Fast-relief options include pressure-point wristbands and ginger, which has proven anti-nausea effects without drowsiness
- Simple strategies like sitting in the front seat, avoiding screens while moving, focusing on the horizon, and eating a light meal before travel help retrain your brain to stop triggering motion-related discomfort

Many people will deal with motion sickness at some point — and when it strikes, it often knocks you out fast. But the real problem isn't your stomach. It's your brain misinterpreting your environment and launching a false alarm that something's gone wrong. This mismatch between your senses shows up anywhere — on winding roads, bumpy flights, rocking boats, or even while using a virtual reality headset.

Suddenly, you're hit with nausea, dizziness, or cold sweats, and your body starts reacting as if it's under attack. But this ancient reflex isn't helping you anymore — it's hijacking your system. The strange part? You might feel totally fine until the exact moment things go off the rails. And once they do, it's hard to recover without stepping away from the trigger.

That's why scientists are now focused on understanding exactly how your body's internal GPS works, and what to do when the signals get scrambled. To understand how to stop motion sickness before it starts, let's look at what happens when your brain, balance system, and visual cues fall out of sync.

Electric Vehicles, Acceleration, and Sensory Confusion — Why Motion Sickness Is Getting Worse

An article published by The Conversation offers a comprehensive look at why certain people are more prone to motion sickness and what types of motion make symptoms worse.[1]

It connects modern lifestyle changes, like the rise of electric vehicles (EVs), with the growing number of people experiencing nausea, dizziness, and fatigue during routine travel. According to the authors, the most widely accepted explanation for motion sickness is sensory conflict: when your brain receives mixed messages from your eyes, ears, and body, it reacts with a wave of uncomfortable symptoms.

- **Electric vehicles introduce new forms of sensory mismatch that confuse your nervous system —** Unlike gas-powered cars, electric vehicles often accelerate rapidly and quietly, which creates a disconnect between what your body feels and what your ears expect to hear.

  "The silence in an electric vehicle removes these prompts," the article explains, "and likely further confuses our brain, making motion sickness worse."[2] Because your brain is used to hearing the engine rev and feeling the subtle vibration of movement, the absence of those cues throws off your sensory alignment.

- **Even healthy adults suddenly become motion sick when they're not in control of the vehicle —** If you're the driver, your brain anticipates turns and stops, which gives it a chance to prepare. But once a car enters autonomous mode, even the driver is no longer protected.

  The article points out, "Interestingly, when an electric vehicle is put into autonomous (self-driving) mode, the driver becomes just as susceptible to motion sickness as the passengers."[3] This insight matters because it shows that motion sickness is less about individual sensitivity and more about whether your brain makes sense of your surroundings.

- **Hormonal changes and neurological conditions increase your risk of motion sickness —** Women tend to be more susceptible, especially during menstruation or pregnancy, when hormonal shifts affect how the brain processes motion.

  People with migraines or vertigo — conditions rooted in the nervous system — are also far more likely to feel sick while in motion. These overlapping neurological patterns suggest that your body's motion response is shaped by other systems already struggling to regulate balance and sensory input.

- **The worst symptoms often occur during low-frequency motion like swaying or turbulence —** Motion sickness isn't about high-speed thrills. In fact, it's usually triggered by slower, more rhythmic movements like rolling waves, winding roads, or sudden turbulence midflight.

  The article explains that "the more pronounced the motion, the more likely we are to get sick," especially during changes in direction, altitude, or vertical sways.[4] This is why long boat rides and bumpy plane landings feel unbearable even for people who usually tolerate everyday car rides.

- **People with damaged vestibular systems are immune to motion sickness —** In rare cases, individuals with inner ear damage — specifically to parts of the **vestibular system** — don't experience motion sickness at all.

Since the vestibular system is responsible for detecting balance and spatial orientation, if it's no longer functioning, your brain stops receiving the "confusing" motion signals that normally trigger nausea and dizziness. That finding backs up the sensory mismatch theory and reinforces how important your inner ear is in the motion sickness equation.

Cold Sweats, Confusion, and the Power of Planning Ahead

An overview of motion sickness from the Cleveland Clinic focuses on the daily situations that trigger symptoms and the specific, actionable steps to take to feel better.[5] You're likely to notice symptoms like dizziness, rapid breathing, nausea, headache, cold sweats, or a sudden drop in energy.

These often show up out of nowhere or build gradually, which makes them hard to predict. The Cleveland Clinic stresses that motion sickness affects people of all ages, but it's especially common in children ages 2 to 12, people with migraines or inner ear issues, and women during menstruation or pregnancy. The more you know your triggers, the easier it becomes to prevent the symptoms from hijacking your travel plans.

- **Strategic seating plays a major role in whether or not you feel sick —** Where you sit matters. Sitting in the front passenger seat of a car, over the wings in an airplane, or in the center of a boat helps minimize the amount of motion your body feels.

  You're also less likely to get sick if you face the direction of travel and avoid seats that face backward or are near exhaust or engine smells. These simple seat choices reduce the amount of conflicting input your body sends to your brain.

- **Avoiding certain habits during travel dramatically reduces your symptoms —** Scrolling your phone, reading a book, or focusing on close-up objects worsens symptoms because it locks your visual focus while your body continues to move. Instead, redirect your gaze to a fixed point in the distance like the horizon or a distant object. Cool air also helps reset your system — rolling down the window or using air vents are a fast and easy fix.

- **A light snack and a ginger chew go a long way, but timing is key —** Your body needs fuel, but a heavy or greasy meal makes things worse. Bland, low-fat, starchy foods, like white rice, are recommended before travel, as is staying hydrated with water — not caffeine or alcohol, which irritate your stomach. **Ginger**, either as tea or chews, is one of the few natural options consistently shown to soothe your stomach and ease nausea when used proactively.

- **Wristbands work best before symptoms start, not after —** Motion sickness wristbands, which apply pressure to a specific point on your wrist called Pericardium 6 (P6), don't work for everyone but are worth trying. However, once symptoms kick in, the window to prevent them has passed. Planning ahead is your best defense.

Military Protocols Reveal Long-Term Solutions Most People Don't Hear About

Published in StatPearls, a paper offers a clinical and neurological explanation of motion sickness and highlights practical therapies developed by military and aerospace medicine to reduce symptoms long-term.[6]

While most advice focuses on short-term fixes, this report shows how repeated exposure — or "habituation" — works better than any medication if you stick with it consistently. It also covers how motion sickness is diagnosed and how it differs from other conditions like migraines or strokes.

- **Long-term exposure works better than pills, but it takes discipline —** According to the review, desensitization training is the most effective way to prevent motion sickness long-term. Programs designed for fighter pilots and astronauts report up to an 85% success rate when exposure sessions are repeated daily or several times per week.

However, this only works if the gaps between exposures are short. If you go more than a week without triggering motion, you lose the gains you've made. This method rewires how your brain and inner ear respond to motion over time, offering a permanent reduction in symptoms without drugs.

- **Symptoms vary widely, from mild nausea to social isolation —** Most people think of motion sickness as nausea and dizziness, but some people experience extreme drowsiness, irritability, loss of appetite, or pallor — a set of symptoms called sopite syndrome. In more severe cases, symptoms include postural instability, intractable vomiting, and even the inability to walk upright. These responses reflect how hard your body is fighting to make sense of conflicting motion signals.

- **Most common anti-nausea drugs are ineffective for motion sickness —** Medications like ondansetron (Zofran), which are often prescribed for nausea from chemotherapy or pregnancy, do not help with motion sickness because they don't target the brain regions activated during motion-triggered sensory mismatch.

Why Some People Feel Sick Faster Than Others

A paper from Lone Star Neurology breaks down the root causes of motion sickness by zooming in on your neurological wiring.[7] The focus isn't just on external motion, but how your individual brain chemistry, sensory pathways, and even family history influence your sensitivity to motion.

- **Your personal susceptibility to motion sickness is heavily influenced by your nervous system —** Some people's brains are simply more reactive to mixed motion signals, which means they get sick more easily. This heightened sensitivity is especially common in people with anxiety, migraines, or a family history of motion sickness.

  Certain people have an "overactive nausea response" — your brain hits the panic button earlier and more intensely when it can't resolve the mismatch between motion and what you see. If this sounds like you, it's not your imagination — it's how

your system is wired.

- **Children and people with neurological quirks are more prone to symptoms —** Children tend to get motion sick more often because their sensory systems are still developing, making it harder for their brains to filter out conflicting input. The same goes for adults who have had previous ear infections or vestibular issues — your inner ear may still send jumbled signals, even after you recover. That leftover sensitivity makes you more likely to get dizzy or nauseated even on short rides.

- **Focusing on the horizon resets your sensory system —** Looking at a fixed point in the distance, like the horizon or a mountain, stabilizes the conflicting inputs between your eyes and ears. When your brain has a reliable visual anchor, it quiets the inner confusion that triggers nausea. This trick is one of the simplest and fastest ways to ease symptoms without using medication.

- **Your inner ear's motion detectors are the real MVP — and the real troublemakers —** The article dives into how your vestibular system uses fluid-filled canals and tiny crystals in your inner ear to tell your brain which direction your head is moving.

  But when those signals don't line up with what your eyes are seeing or what your muscles are feeling, your brain misinterprets the experience as toxic or dangerous. That's when nausea kicks in as a defensive reflex. It's not a bug in the system — it's an ancient survival response gone overboard in modern environments.

Practical Steps to Reset Your System and Avoid Motion Sickness

If you get car sick, sea sick, or dizzy on a plane, your body isn't broken — it's reacting exactly how it's built to. The key is retraining your sensory system to interpret motion correctly so it doesn't default to nausea, dizziness, or cold sweats. I want you to know that you don't have to rely on medications that sedate you or slap on a patch that barely works.

If you're dealing with motion sickness regularly, here are five specific steps that address the root cause — your nervous system's confused response to mixed motion signals. These tips are drawn straight from military training protocols, neurological analysis, and clinical experience. They're practical, effective, and easy to apply.

1. **Train your brain to adapt with short daily exposures —** If you're sensitive to motion, avoid long gaps between exposures. Just like a muscle, your sensory system needs practice. Gradual, repeated exposure — like five to 10 minutes daily of sitting in a gently moving vehicle without distractions — helps your brain learn to tolerate motion. Don't avoid it. Use it to your advantage. Fighter pilots and astronauts use this technique, and you can, too.

2. **Pick your seat strategically every time you travel —** Where you sit makes or breaks your experience. If you're in a car, always ride in the front seat and look straight ahead. On a plane, book a seat over the wings. On a boat, aim for the center where movement is the least intense. Avoid rear seats, backward-facing seats, and areas with strong smells — those confuse your system even more.[8]

3. **Use your eyes to override the dizziness —** Staring at your phone or reading makes motion sickness worse. Instead, focus your gaze on a fixed point in the distance — like the road ahead or the horizon. This gives your brain a stable reference point, helping it sync the visual input with your inner ear signals. It's one of the simplest fixes to try, and it works almost instantly.

4. **Time your food and choose ginger over greasy snacks —** Eat a light, starchy meal about 30 to 60 minutes before travel. Avoid heavy, greasy, or spicy food. If your stomach feels uneasy, take natural ginger chews or sip ginger tea. Ginger is clinically proven to ease nausea without sedation. This is a strategy that works when used early and consistently.

5. **Try natural pressure-point wristbands if you're flying —** If you fly often or have severe symptoms, motion sickness wristbands are worth trying. The wristbands press on a specific point on your wrist to reduce nausea. Just be sure to use them

before symptoms start, not after. Timing is everything.

FAQs About Motion Sickness

Q: What actually causes motion sickness?

A: Motion sickness happens when your brain gets mixed signals from your eyes, inner ear, and body. When these sensory systems disagree about whether you're moving, your brain reacts as if something is wrong — often triggering nausea, dizziness, or fatigue.

Q: Who is most at risk for motion sickness?

A: Children, especially between ages 2 and 12, people with a family history of motion sickness, and those with migraines, anxiety, or vestibular disorders are more likely to experience symptoms. Women are also more sensitive in many cases.

Q: What natural methods work best to reduce motion sickness?

A: Looking at the horizon, avoiding screens, eating light meals before travel, and using ginger are some of the most effective natural strategies. Daily motion exposure training — like riding in a car for short periods — helps retrain your brain to tolerate motion over time.

Q: What fast, nondrug options actually work for relief?

A: Pressure-point wristbands are a drug-free option shown to reduce nausea in some people. They're most effective when worn before symptoms start, not after.

Q: How do I prevent motion sickness before it starts?

A: Choose your seat wisely — sit in the front of a car, over the wings of a plane, or in the center of a boat. Avoid reading or scrolling on your phone, keep your eyes on a stable point in the distance, and eat a bland, starchy snack about an hour before travel. Prevention works best when you act before symptoms begin.

Sources and References

- [1, 2, 3, 4] The Conversation, June 23, 2025
- [5] Cleveland Clinic, Motion Sickness
- [6] National Library of Medicine, Stat Pearls, Motion Sickness
- [7] Lone Star Neurology, March 27, 2025
- [8] Mayo Clinic, Motion Sickness First Aid