

New Concerns About Flying?

Experts Say Fears Are Rational, but Odds of Danger Are Still Low By
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Nov. 12, 2001 -- Just when airline travel was gaining momentum, news comes of another jet crash in Queens. For many people, this event only reinforces jittery nerves. How rational are our fears about flying now?

An aviation safety expert with Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Arnold Barnett, PhD, is fielding a phone call at home before he leaves for Boston's Logan Airport. "We're getting ready to leave for Houston in a matter of minutes, and my wife is very upset," he tells WebMD. "I'm certainly thinking of having lots of wine on the plane."

Used to be, risk experts like Barnett calculated aviation odds using historical data, looking at the future as a continuation of the past. And over past decades, the risks were very low.

"But Sept. 11, in my view, changed everything," Barnett says. In terms of death count, "the cataclysm on that day is impossible to overstate."

Given the terrorists' sophistication, "estimating the odds today -- I don't know how we can magically get numbers," he tells WebMD. "Just a few months ago, I used to say it was as unwise to be afraid of flying as it was to be afraid to go to the grocery store for fear that the ceiling would collapse. I don't know if that's true now. At the moment, airlines have been targeted, whereas grocery stores have not."

Even dealing with our fears is "complicated," says Barbara Rothbaum, PhD, director of trauma and anxiety recovery program at Emory University School of Medicine.

"When things first happened on Sept. 11, as horrible as it was, everyone was hopeful that would be it, that we would have a chance to recover," she tells WebMD. "But with things that have happened -- the Greyhound bus incident, the anthrax incidents, and now this -- I think most people are feeling more vulnerable than they were before, people are more hyper-vigilant than they were before."

Rothbaum specializes in treating fear of flying, and has developed a virtual reality program to help people get over claustrophobia and fear of heights that are classically related to flying. "Many of them were ready to fly again, but now they're hearing from their spouses, 'No, not now.'"

Even people who were blasé about flying "are just not doing it now," says Rothbaum. "Now people's fears are of terrorist activity; they're feeling vulnerable in general."

Getting past those fears is simply going to take time, she tells WebMD. "It's only when the skies get calmer -- for a good period of time -- that people will see that flying is safe."

How is Barnett feeling about flying today? "Not so good," he says. But he's got to be in Houston for business.

He's getting on that plane -- "of course I am," he says. "But I can understand how people will feel differently." He has great respect for those who are considering driving instead.

"I can see that a whole spectrum of reactions is rational," Barnett tells WebMD. "I certainly would not say that's silly, that a plane going down in a period of two months doesn't matter."

But when one considers the odds, there is some reassurance. "The fact is, U.S. airlines do have something like 10,000 flights a day," says Barnett. "If we go a month without a crash, as we did in October, we're talking about 300,000 jet flights and hundreds of thousands of commuter flights, which got there safely. So statistically, even if you assume the risks are much higher now than in September, they're not high in absolute terms."

"The odds are clearly that we're going to get there, and you save so much time while flying," he tells WebMD. "Even if flying were slightly more dangerous than other modes of transport, the question is, would you accept a one-minute reduction in your life expectancy to save 10 hours today?"

There indeed is something to worry about, says Barnett. "People who are worried now are not being irrational. They're being worried about objective events. I'm not as optimistic as I was in August. But you have to admit, flying is a beautiful thing, and the risks are not so great that you should give it up."

Medically Reviewed
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