



GREAT LAKES SAILING

Sail the Sweetwater Seas

DEALING WITH SEASICKNESS

Nothing but nothing will suck the pleasure out of being on a boat that the nauseous feeling of impending seasickness. It can ruin an otherwise spectacular experience.

There is a rather grim joke that goes like this: Initially, when you become seasick, you are afraid you might die. Not long afterwards, you are afraid you won't die!

As long as people have sailed, there are some who will feel everything from queasiness to full-blown, boots-up-your-throat retching. And equally as long, there have been efforts to find a way to deal with it.

Now, full disclosure here. **I am NOT a doctor. This is NOT medical advice.** Regardless of the thoughts shared in this article, if there is **anything** that you would consider doing that affects your health, **see your doctor!**

What I have tried to do is gather in one place some recognized suggestions for dealing with seasickness. Some of these ideas may work for some people, some may work for others, some or even all may not work at all. These are offered as suggestions only for you to consider. In acting on any of them, you are responsible for your decisions.

I am very fortunate in that in all my years of sailing I have never been seasick – been close once or twice but never hit by it. However, I have seen its debilitating effects up close. On a Coast Guard Auxiliary crew I served on, one top-notch crew member was seasick every single time we shouldered our way out of our channel into the waves of Lake Ontario. And, on our own sailboat, I have seen my partner overwhelmed by seasickness as we encountered seriously rough waters. She is one heck of a trooper and never once complained but it sure pains me to see her go through that experience.

Beyond empathy for seeing someone else suffer, there is also the very practical concern of the impact on boat operations. A crew member who is seasick is unable to help with running the boat. As most sailboats are crewed by a couple, the result is that the master is now single handing with the additional concern for the disabled crew member. In bad weather, this is a situation that can go sideways quickly.

So, lets talk about seasickness – what causes it and some possible remedies.

In plain English, seasickness results from crossed messages that your brain receives. In terms of movement and your body's relative position, your brain gets input from 3 key sources – your eyes, your inner ear and neuro-transmitters in your joints. On a moving platform such as a boat, your eyes, looking at your surroundings, tell your brain that you are stationary. However, the message from your

inner ear is different. Add to that, the stream of messages from your various joints that tell your brain to flex this muscle, relax that one, etc – all in an effort to keep your body in a stable position. Think of the motion on a boat – you are constantly adjusting yourself to maintain your balance and those messages go straight to your brain. Stationary? Moving? To your brain, this is a confused and mixed message, possibly with severe consequences. Ramp it up enough (which will vary hugely between individuals) and your brains says ‘clear the decks – dump excess external substances’ - i.e. the contents of your stomach.

So – what can you do about that? There is no magic cure, no silver bullet. If there was, some drug company would be selling it for a king’s ransom. However, there are some things you can do and that you can take that **may** help. As I noted above, these ideas may work for some people but not others. There are simply no guarantees here. And remember, **see paragraph 4 above!**

First, be conscious of what you eat before going sailing. Don’t leave on an empty stomach. Dry heaves are not a successful substitute for throwing up! Cooked oatmeal or wheat germ are a good breakfast. Both are high in vitamin B₂ which is known to prevent nausea. Pass on the fried bacon and eggs – greasy foods will certainly not help. Some say acidic drinks like citrus juices and coffee should be avoided, so, if in doubt, skip them. Substitute water or tea, especially a tea such as ginger or peppermint (see below). Regardless, keep your meal light and bring snacks to carry you through the passage.

Once underway, if you feel a slight onset of nausea, nibbling on some dry crackers can help, along with plain water. There are also some natural products that may help.

Don’t wait til you feel queasy. The following natural products can and likely should be taken well in advance of departure.

The number one natural remedy has to be ginger! It has been used as a treatment for motion sickness for centuries. Ginger is a completely natural product. It is widely available and cheap. It comes in numerous forms - from raw ginger you can get in a grocery store to capsules in the health food section of many pharmacies to ginger lozenges you can suck on. It can also be found in everything from cookies to pop (think ginger ale as long as it contains real ginger) to tea .For many people, it works quickly, often even after you have started to feel nauseous.

Another natural product is the herb fennel. Fennel has long been used to prevent and treat motion sickness. Both the seeds, the bulb and leaves of the plant can be used. These parts of the herb as well as fennel tea can be found in most health food stores

The third natural product to try is peppermint. It is known for its properties in calming an upset stomach and is widely available from raw leaves to the ubiquitous hard peppermint candies – and don’t forget peppermint tea either. It is a great substitute for the coffee you skipped at breakfast!

You can also make a drink by steeping a spoonful of ginger, fennel and peppermint leaves in a litre of water and then sipping on it as time passes. It not only combines these 3 known curatives but also serves to keep you hydrated. And speaking of hydrating, skip alcohol until you are tied up. Alcohol dehydrates and, if you aren’t careful, you could be reprising the effects of a long-ago, late night college party you would rather forget.

There are some physical things you can do as well. The first is your location. Stay on deck! Resist the urge to go below – that is almost guaranteed to bring on seasickness. Being on deck allows your eyes to fix on an unmoving focal point. - the horizon or a distant piece of land. Since motion sickness is caused by a confusion of signals between what your eyes see and what your body is feels, one of the best ways to overcome that is to stare at one specific distant point – even a far-off cloud will do.

A second physical thing you can do is take advantage of an ancient, well-documented acupuncture technique. It is well-established that there is a pressure point on your inner wrist that has for many people, an almost immediate effect in relieving symptoms of motion sickness. And employing this technique is dead simple: press between the two tendons on the inside of your wrist, about three finger widths from the base of your palm. Alternate from one wrist to the other every five minutes or so. You can also purchase elastic bands you can wear on each wrist. These have a hard ‘button’ that presses against that pressure point and accomplishes the same thing. That’s what my partner uses.

Of course, there are also drugs, both non-prescription and prescription, that can be taken to help ward off seasickness. Before reading what follows, **go back and re-read paragraph 4!**

Probably the most common over-the-counter drug is Gravol. It works by slowing down the signals that reach your brain. However, that comes with the possibility of drowsiness or a feeling of fatigue. It also comes in a non-drowsy formulation with ginger added (which suggests to me that ginger should possibly be your first option). There are side effects, particularly in combination with other drugs you may be taking so talk with the pharmacist before buying it. And again, skip the alcohol when you are taking Gravol.

Beyond Gravol. There are prescription drugs that your doctor may prescribe. They are clearly beyond my competence to talk about. But, a conversation with your doctor may determine if they can work for you.

Hopefully, if you suffer from seasickness, some of these ideas, individually or in combination, will prevent or ease the symptoms so you can enjoy the beauty that is inherent in sailing.

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