



Belt up!

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From turbulence to a sudden stop while taxiing, a seatbelt is the best defence against injuries, writes Helen Waddington.

IN DECEMBER 1997, a Boeing 747 encountered turbulence en route from Tokyo to Honolulu. Most passengers were not wearing seatbelts even though the sign was illuminated. Several were thrown upward, their heads slamming into the ceiling. Those standing in the aisle were thrown several metres. One female sustained fatal injuries and 74 others were injured.

In another case, on a flight from Singapore to Sydney with 236 passengers and 16 crew on board, an aeroplane encountered turbulence over central Australia. It plummeted 300 feet. Nine passengers, including a pregnant woman and three crew members, suffered neck, back and hip injuries, with one of the passengers requiring surgery. Those who were injured were not wearing seatbelts.

Among non-fatal accidents, in-flight turbulence is the leading cause of injury to passengers and crew. From 1981 to 1997 there were 342 reports of turbulence affecting major air carriers worldwide. Three passengers died. Of these, two had not been wearing their seatbelts while the sign was on. And of the 80 passengers who sustained serious injuries, 73 had not buckled up.

The past decade in Australia saw 24 incidents of in-flight turbulence causing injuries

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ranging from minor bruising to broken bones and neck injuries requiring hospitalisation.

Clear air turbulence is unpredictable and cannot be detected. Seatbelts are the only way to guard against injury. The seatbelt sign is rarely illuminated for the entire flight, as that would run the risk of complacency. However, occupants injured during turbulence are usually not wearing seatbelts, ignoring recommendations to keep the restraints fastened while seated, even when the signs are off.

And airliners are not the only aircraft affected. There are also reports of injuries to passengers on scenic and charter flights.

Civil aviation regulations require seatbelts to be worn during takeoff and landing, during instrument approaches, when an aircraft is flying at below 1,000 feet, and during turbulence. The regulations also

require passengers to follow the instructions of the pilot in command and cabin crew. Cabin crew should emphasise that an illuminated seatbelt sign is a direction from the pilot in command that must be followed.

Operators need to have clear procedures guiding the crew in use of the seatbelt light. Whenever the seatbelt sign is switched on, crew must follow up with a public announcement directing passengers to remain seated and fasten their seatbelts. When the light is illuminated, the crew should conduct a compliance check of the cabin. It is the pilot's responsibility to decide if it is necessary for cabin crew to resume their seats.

The Civil Aviation Safety Authority is concerned about passengers disregarding the seatbelt sign during takeoff and landing, and recently issued a statement to raise public awareness.

The temptation to get up early and collect cabin baggage before the rush is too great for some. Crew can lead by example, staying seated as long as is practical. A humorous reminder that rushing off the aircraft will only prolong the wait for luggage in the terminal might also help.