

Travel Trouble

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

Winter is upon us which means that many will head north in search of heat - and competition! Enduring 24 hours sitting squashed into that miniscule space they call an airline seat to get to the northern hemisphere does all sorts of hideous things to our bodies; fatigue, stiffness, blocked ears, swollen ankles and even blood clots for the unlucky. Blood clots aside which require immediate and specific treatment, none of these other problems are ideal if you plan to arrive and compete soon after. Whilst it would be best to arrive a week or so before a major competition, that's not always possible and from a physio aspect this leaves you open to injury caused from stiffness, fatigue and blocked ears affecting your balance, swollen ankles (or gravitational oedema) causing ankles to become extra flexible and more prone to straining, and blood clots - well really bad news.

Minimising fatigue and stiffness during the flight

Whatever class of travel you are in you will have upset your sleep pattern and will be fatigued. To counteract this, as soon as you get onto the plane change your time to the time of the country you are going and start to adapt. Yes, it is odd trying to have dinner at 8am but it helps to acclimatise faster. To avoid stiffness, ankle swelling and clots try to move every 30 minutes to stimulate your circulation and stop tension in your muscles. Wriggle your ankles, tap the ground, bend and straighten your knees - do all of these at some speed to try to stimulate your circulation while you are sitting. Spend a couple of minutes doing this then get up and stand or walk around, if possible, every hour.

Recovery starts from the moment you arrive

When you arrive it is important to get yourself back to normal, no matter how good a traveller you are. The day you arrive try to get out into the fresh air and walk. This will help to stimulate your circulation and reduce the ankle swelling and muscular stiffness. I definitely advise against running immediately you arrive until you have made sure the stiffness and ankle swelling have resolved.

Drills for Day 2+

The day after this I would suggest find yourself a grassy area - nice and soft for your travel weary toes, have a 10 minute warm up jog followed by some drills. The best drills in my view are;

- High knee lifts
- Kicking back -running kicking your heels up behind you trying to kick your posterior
- Big lunges - stepping forward lunging until your knee is almost touching the ground
- Skipping
- Hopping from one leg to the other
- Backwards running
- Sideways running

Try to do 20 metres of each of these 3 times, and then a set of 6x50m sprints followed by a 10minute warm down. The purpose of this is to get your body used to moving again by increasing your circulation and gently getting all your muscles stretched out release any residual tension. These drills will stretch out all the muscle groups but not put anything under too much pressure. Gentle exercise will help your body to be naturally tired from exercise and allow you to return to your normal sleep pattern helping reduce that hideous fatigue feeling.

A few days of this type of gentle recovery exercise is ideal. Of course if you do have any calf pain, shortness of breath or headaches you must get this checked. There is the risk of a clot having formed in the calf or travelled to the lungs or brain, even if you have been diligent in keeping on the move whilst you were travelling.

Injuries that occur to overseas visitors do tend to happen in the first few days after arrival, and my view is that they have tried to push themselves too hard, too soon. Listen to your body and give yourself time to adapt and prevent injury so you don't miss that important competition.

Paula Shingler is a Physiotherapist, long time member of Big Foot Orienteers, keen fell runner and mother of 2