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Smelly passengers at 30,000 feet

From Vicks VapoRub to bags of coffee, frequent fliers offer solutions to ward off the scent of the seatmate with body odor issues.

By Catharine Hamm, Los Angeles Times

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Question: My husband and I fly regularly on American Airlines to visit ailing parents in Austin, Texas. Most of our flights have been positive experiences, but a recent one was not. In short, the man in Seat 29D had horrendous body odor. Unfortunately, we were in 29E and 29F. For the next three hours, my husband diverted the air vent back to the cause. After the flight landed, the flight attendant looked me in the eye (everyone else was gone) and asked how we had endured the terrible odor. She was very apologetic. What rights do we have as paying customers?

Susanne Nelson

Montrose

Answer: The topic of body odor seems tailor-made for painfully bad jokes until you've been trapped on a plane with no other seats available, so we will exercise some restraint in responding.

"Airlines handle these issues on a case-by-case basis, but if passengers are disruptive to others they may be asked to fly at another time," said Victoria Day, a representative of Airlines for America, formerly the Air Transport Assn., a trade group for U.S. carriers.

American Airlines is specific about the issue. It "has what we call a 'customer acceptance' policy that outlines numerous reasons for not accepting a passenger for travel on one of our flights," said Mary Frances Fagan, an American representative. One of those reasons, she says, is listed on American's website: having "an offensive odor not caused by a disability or illness."

It's not up to passengers to mediate or resolve the issue, but they do need to speak to a flight attendant, who then must address it.

But this is truly a cause for inner turmoil. Keep quiet and you'll be miserable. Speak up and you'll be guilt-

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ridden. And if the odor is the result of an illness or disability, you may be stuck. What's a traveler to do? Frequent fliers emailed me to offer a good offense against the offensive.

Frank Scafidi, director, public affairs for the National Insurance Crime Bureau, recommends Vicks VapoRub. "When I was a Los Angeles deputy sheriff, I carried a jar of that stuff in my patrol gear," Scafidi said. "Used it many times dealing with dead bodies that can get pretty rank in the heat of summer. Slap a little Vicks under the nostrils and it's bearable. If it works on a stiff, it'll work on anything." Travel writer Susan Spano recommends a little Tiger Balm under the nose. It has a mentholated smell and is generally used for muscle aches. Whichever one you use, remember that you cannot carry more than 3 ounces through airport security. (Both products can be found in packages that are less than an ounce, and both might make sense to have on a trip.)

If your mother insisted on rubbing you with Vicks when you were a kid and you now can't stand that smell, consider using what I call the Starbucks solution, courtesy of Stan Steinreich, president and chief executive of Steinreich Communications Group Inc. of New Jersey. "I just had this issue on a flight from Newark to Tel Aviv," he said. "I was sitting in business on United [and the] guy next to me stunk. Business class was full so there was no place to move.

"I asked the flight attendant for a bag of coffee because I had seen other flight attendants use it as air freshener by attaching it to the coat hanger in the bathroom. I kept this bag of coffee up to my nose — thank goodness I am an avid coffee drinker and like the smell — throughout the flight, even putting the blanket over my head with the bag next to my nose when I fell asleep.

"When I awoke, the flight attendant told me to look around. She had given other complaining passengers coffee bags as well to use."

If you're not a coffee drinker, April Masini, who distributes advice at AskApril.com, recommends products called No Cooties (<http://www.nocooties.net>) and Aroma Plane Defense (click "Inhalations" at <http://www.aromafloria.com>).

Traci Coulter, founder of TCOPR, a public relations agency here and in New York, offers an aromatic and a pharmacological variation: "I dab some perfume on my wrist from my travel-size roll-on," she said, "pop an Ambien and go to sleep in the fetal position in my seat."

Confronted with this dilemma, I think we'd all like to curl up in the fetal position. Because sometimes — I can't help myself, readers — life just stinks.

Have a travel dilemma? Write to travel@latimes.com. We regret we cannot answer every inquiry.

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