

20 WAYS TO battle seasickness without medication

There's no cure for this debilitating condition, but there are plenty of ways to help get through it, explains Michelle Segrest

You never forget your first time of being truly seasick. As we left the wind shadow of Rønne on the island of Bornholm,

Denmark, my belly began to boil as the 30-knot gusts and 3m waves rocked our 24ft yacht, *Toja*, from side to side, up and down, back and forth.

The queasiness was overwhelming – much worse than the flu, or food poisoning, or even a harsh hangover.

Even though the air was chilled at



Michelle suffered extreme seasickness for four days and nights in the Bay of Biscay

around -2°C, sweat poured down my face and my head felt like it would split in two from the pounding ache.

My eyesight began to blur, and I could feel the colour leave my skin.

I was sitting on the high side of the cockpit as *Toja* was heeling at about 25°.

"I'm about to lose it," I heard myself say in a surprisingly calm monotone.

Then I quickly moved to the low side and emptied my insides with brutal force. I heard the D-ring clamp into place on my

life vest as the captain strapped me into the cockpit with a safety harness to keep me from falling into the frigid Baltic Sea.

Or, perhaps, it was to keep me from throwing myself overboard – which is exactly what I wanted to do.

I laid lifeless over the side of the boat for the next 10 hours until there was nothing left to exit my body but foul-tasting, burning, boiling acid.

I finally found the strength to let go of the rail and lie flat on my back on the cockpit floor. My head was right next to the locker containing the diesel tanks, and even though the engine wasn't running, I could smell the fumes. This didn't help my situation, but I couldn't move. I felt paralysed. I could feel the dehydration set in as my calves and back began to spasm with knotty muscle cramps. I asked the skipper when the nightmare would end.

"When the boat stops," he said in his usual stoic, matter-of-fact way.

Four hours later, we entered the channel to Karlskrona, Sweden. As promised, the rocking boat and my dilapidated body calmed as we entered the marina.

All of a sudden, I felt fine. Just like that.

At the time, I had been sailing for four years, but this was my first experience with seasickness.

It wouldn't be the last.

RIGHT It takes about three days for Michelle Segrest to get her sea legs, but then she feels well enough to read and relax



Sit under an apple tree

Since then, I have experienced epic battles with seasickness, including four days and nights of nonstop misery while sailing across the Bay of Biscay with 4-to-5m waves that never calmed. I have talked to dozens of sailors – experienced skippers and beginners – who regularly battle the debilitating effects of seasickness and have researched the phenomenon extensively.

It's often been said that the only way to prevent seasickness is to sit under an apple tree, which implies that if you spend time at sea you'll most likely get seasick at some point in your life.

Countless sailors have told me, "I've never been seasick... well, except for this one time when..."

I am now convinced that there are two kinds of sailors – those who get seasick, and those who lie about it.

Since the beginning of time, humans have battled seasickness. Ancient Greeks referred to it as the 'plague of the sea,' and famous sufferers through the ages include Christopher Columbus, Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson, and Charles Darwin.

It helps to know that I'm not alone.

"The misery I endured from sea-sickness is far, far beyond what I ever guessed at," Charles Darwin once wrote to his father. "If it was not for sea-sickness, the whole world would be sailors."

The Greek physician Hippocrates foreshadowed the current term, 'motion sickness', writing, 'sailing on the sea proves that motion disorders the body.'

There is no cure for seasickness, but

'Famous sufferers through the ages include Christopher Columbus, Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson, and Charles Darwin'

there are many ways to battle your way through it – pharmaceutically, psychologically, and naturally.

What is seasickness?

When I'm not experiencing seasickness, I'm fascinated by it.

According to experts, seasickness (also called mal de mer) is the reaction of your body's inner ear balance system to the unfamiliar motion of the ship. The movement of the ship causes stress on the balancing portion of the brain. Your brain sees things on the ship such as walls and furniture and instinctively knows from past experience that they are supposed to be still.

But when you're on a boat, everything is in motion. The air is moving. The sea beneath you is moving. And yes, everything on the ship is moving at least a little bit – even when you think it all safely secured. Signals to the brain get stressed and confused, and nausea sets in.

Seasickness often disappears within a few days, even without treatment. The ➔

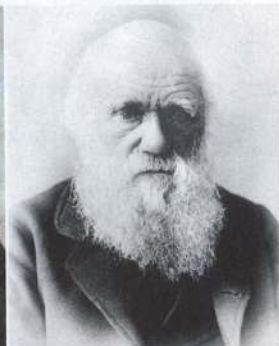
LEFT Some sailors have a tolerance for certain wave heights, above which they get seasick



RIGHT Columbus, Darwin and Nelson all suffered from seasickness



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brain eventually adjusts to this new environment, and the sufferer gets his or her 'sea legs'. For me, it's usually about three days of misery, and then I begin to feel fine for the rest of a long offshore passage. One sailor told me that his tolerance was 3m waves. In conditions less than that, he was fine.

Research shows that in addition to the balance of the inner ear, sinuses, blood flow, heart rhythm, hydration, and many psychological factors including nerves, excitement, and fear can contribute to seasickness.

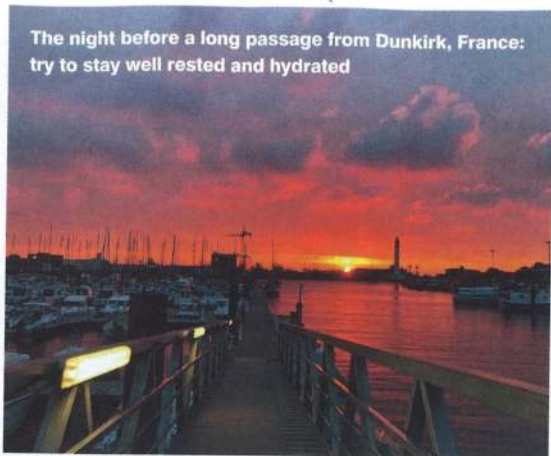
The physical effects of seasickness are gut-wrenching, but the psychological element is valid too.

I have a friend who is a sailing instructor. She tells students that if they hold a potato in their left hand, they won't get seasick. This mind-over-matter method works for most of them. If you've ever experienced seasickness, you'll try anything.

Triggers for seasickness

For most sailors, these are the five primary triggers for seasickness.

Fear Experience helps with fear but



The night before a long passage from Dunkirk, France: try to stay well rested and hydrated

remaining calm is essential, even in difficult conditions.

Food If you have an empty stomach, or if you eat the wrong kinds of food (like spicy, fatty, or acidic food), your tummy may not cooperate in a pleasant way when the nausea sets in.

Fatigue Be well rested before setting sail, especially if the weather is questionable or if it's a long offshore

passage with a small crew.

Temperature Many people get more nauseous when it's extremely cold or extremely hot. Try to dress in layers and appropriately for the weather and be prepared for temperature changes.

Hydration Stay well hydrated and avoid alcohol. Even if you continue to throw it back up, try to stay hydrated during bouts with seasickness. Even a few drops of water can help to quell the nausea.

Fighting seasickness without medication

There are many medicinal ways to battle seasickness, but none of them work for me. It's important you consult a doctor to make sure pharmaceutical remedies are safe for you and interact well with any other medications you take regularly. Here are some ways to cope without medication.

Concentrating on a task, such as helming, can help take your mind off seasickness



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20 TIPS TO HELP COPE

- 1** Try to avoid areas with strong smells (lockers containing the diesel tanks, the galley, the heads, etc).
- 2** Prevent dehydration and muscle cramps by drinking plenty of fluids before departure and always avoid alcohol if you are prone to seasickness.
- 3** Digest some calories, even if you throw it back up. Anything with ginger helps (ginger snaps, ginger tea, raw ginger, ginger ale, ginger candy, ginger chews). Sucking on peppermint candy also helps. Sometimes I place a small bit of mint-flavoured toothpaste on my tongue to help with the nausea.
- 4** Consider the reverse taste of foods. For example, an apple tastes the same on the way down as it does on the way back up, but tuna or yogurt will leave an icky taste in your mouth that will add to the queasiness.
- 5** When you begin to feel queasy, stay busy. Grab the wheel to feel a sense of control or focus on a small task.
- 6** Stay in the fresh air, if possible, and always focus on the horizon to help maintain your centre of gravity. Standing



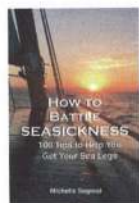
Panther Media GmbH/Alamy

ABOVE Don't try to cook in rough conditions and avoid spicy food
LEFT Always focus on the horizon

or lying flat to keep your stomach extended is better than sitting in a position that constricts your torso.

- 7** When it's not your shift, lie flat in the centre part of the ship with your eyes closed. Try to sleep, if possible. Avoid the bow of the boat.
- 8** Rest when you can, even if you don't feel tired.
- 9** Hold a potato in your left hand or try another psychological trick. Sometimes mind over matter works if you truly believe it.
- 10** Try not to let fear paralyse you. Trust your skipper to alleviate the fear that you may be in danger. Trust your ship to get you to your destination safely. Trust yourself and try to reassure yourself that everything will be OK.
- 11** Embrace the things you love about being on the water and try to focus on the good things rather than the queasiness or the fear. Try to enjoy the journey and focus on the excitement of the destination.
- 12** Arm yourself with information but try to avoid doing too much research about bodies of water or conditions that scare you.

Even extreme seasickness can't keep Michelle Segrest and her beagles away from the water

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Michelle Segrest is a journalist and a sailor. For many more tips, history, and stories about fighting seasickness, read her book *How to Battle Seasickness: 100 Tips to*

Help You Get Your Sea Legs. She is also the author of *How to Sail with Dogs: 100 Tips for a Pet-Friendly Voyage*.

- 13** Try some non-medical devices such as wrist bands and sea bands, and wear loose, comfortable clothing that is appropriate for the weather. Extreme hot and cold temperatures can trigger queasiness.

14 When skipper and crew are seasick, shorten the shifts (for example, from four hours to two hours).

15 Find a comfortable place in the cabin to sleep when you are not on watch – one in which you won't be tossed around too much (for example, on the floor between the bunks where motion is limited).

16 Don't try to cook in rough conditions. Instead, prepare in advance some snacks and cold meals and have them available to grab and eat quickly in the cockpit. Have plenty of drinks available in the cockpit to stay hydrated. Having some food and drinks handy on deck will help avoid the need to go down into the cabin and keep you in the fresh air.

17 Distractions help. When you feel the uneasiness set in, focus on the horizon and distract yourself with something that requires concentration (for example, recite the Greek Alphabet, count to 100 in German, sing or recite all the lyrics of a song, recite dialogue from your favourite movie).

18 Challenge yourself. For example, I made it a goal to never miss a watch, no matter how bad I felt. This will give you something to strive for and a happy feeling of accomplishment.

19 Find something stable to hold on to for balance (for example, a winch drum). Spread your legs about shoulder width apart and try to offset the movement of the ship with movement from your body. I describe this as trying to use an imaginary hula hoop.

20 Nerves, excitement, and fear can contribute to seasickness. Try to stay calm the day of departure. If you are prone to seasickness, accept that it's going to happen and focus more on fighting through it. This will help to calm the nerves and quell the fear. Focus on the things that help you rather than trying to beat it.