

Survey Says: The Scoop on Motion-sickness Meds

We surveyed 37 offshore sailors about seasickness and their use of over-the-counter and prescription antiemetics. We chose the respondents based on their offshore experience. All had made at least two offshore passages; most had crossed several oceans and lived aboard for two to 10 years. Four children were included.

We asked each respondent to describe the conditions and symptoms associated with their seasickness, and their ability to function without medication. We also asked what medications they had used, what dosages they had taken, whether or not the medications had been effective, what side effects had been experienced, which medications they used regularly, which they carried aboard, and which they recommended.

Their answers demonstrate both the prevalence and idiosyncrasy of seasickness. Three-quarters (28) of the survey respondents relied on medication to prevent seasickness for part of most offshore voyages. Of those surveyed, 25 percent had never suffered from seasickness and never used medication, 20 percent were rarely sick, 55 percent had symptoms for the first few days of a passage, and only one was sick the entire passage. Two respondents did not acclimate when they took medication, and if they stopped taking it before the passage ended, they would be sick for a few days. Three-quarters of those who normally took drugs could function well enough to keep a watch without medication.

Most sailors surveyed who take antiemetics, therefore, do so only for the first few days of a passage; most could function if they did not take any medications; and most would acclimate without drugs.

Twenty-six of those surveyed use drugs as a preventative because the symptoms

are not only unpleasant, they can be dangerous when sailing shorthanded. About a quarter of those who used medications described their symptoms as “feeling muddle-headed” or “having difficulty concentrating.” This can be much more serious than it sounds when navigation and decision-making are affected.

Other symptoms included drowsiness (33 percent), lassitude or lethargy (25 percent), nausea (79 percent), and vomiting (50 percent). Half felt queasy and uncomfortable but rarely vomited; 14 percent suddenly felt sick, vomited, and were fine again. And the rest gradually grew more lethargic and vomited more frequently.

Which drug works for a given person is as individual as their symptoms, so finding the right balance means experimenting with the various remedies on shore, before side effects or seasickness could affect

crew safety. Of the 28 who had used medication, all had tried multiple remedies.

Though their answers were surprisingly consistent, our survey group was not large enough to be statistically significant. So we interviewed four charter skippers who regularly take large groups offshore in the North Atlantic and the Southern Ocean; each has had experience with seasickness in dozens of people. We also got input from John Neale of Mahina Expeditions, which has taken more than 1,000 sailing students on offshore training expeditions in the last 20 years. Then, we surveyed scientific studies on motion sickness, including a study done for Canada’s Public Health Agency by the Committee to Advise on Tropical Medicine and Travel titled “Statement on Motion Sickness” (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/96vol22/dr2213ea.html). It confirmed most of our survey findings.

PS		VALUEGUIDE	SEASICKNESS MEDICATION SURVEY RESULTS		
	MEDICATION* (Generic)	% THOSE SURVEYED WHO TRIED	% USERS WHO FOUND INEFFECTIVE	% USERS WHO HAD SIDE EFFECTS ¹ / SIDE EFFECTS REPORTED**	% WHO PREFER THIS / RECOMMEND THIS ²
ANTIHISTAMINES	BONINE (Meclizine)	39.3%	27.3%	45.5%: Slight to moderate drowsiness	10.7% / 10.5%
	DRAMAMINE (Dimenhydrinate)	42.9%	33.3%	83.3%: Moderate to extreme drowsiness	None / None
	MAREZINE (Cyclizine)	14.3%	None	75.0%: Dry mouth, slight drowsiness	7.1% / 10.5%
	PHENERGAN (Promethazine)	10.7%	None	100.0%: Impaired/drugged, moderate to extreme drowsiness	None / None
	STUGERON (Cinnizarine)	82.1%	4.3%	34.8%: Dry mouth, weird dreams, slight drowsiness	64.3% / 57.9%
SCOPO LAMINES	TRANSDERM SCOP(OLAMINE) (Hyoscine)	42.9%	8.3%	100%: Dry mouth, drowsiness, vision problems, impaired/drugged, rash, balance problems, inability to concentrate, inability to be woken, hallucinations	None / None
	SCOPACE Hyoscine	3.6%	None	None reported	3.6% / None

✓ Recommended ★ Best Choice \$ Budget Buy
 * Results are from a survey of 28 sailors who have used some form of seasick medication in their lifetime. ** Listed in order of most frequent to least frequent; not all possible side effects listed, only those reported by respondents. 1. In severe weather, when taking for severe symptoms. 2. Percentage of total respondents who prefer/recommend product for moderate to severe symptoms.