

EasyJet to filter toxic air in cabins

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September 17 2017, 12:01am,

The Sunday Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/easyjet-to-filter-toxic-air-in-cabins-6qzrf6six>

The budget carrier is the first to take action over links to an illness long denied by airlines.



EasyJet said 'health concerns' led it to design a new air filtration system for testing on aircraft next year. ALAMY

EasyJet is to fit filters to stop toxic fumes entering its passenger cabins and cockpits in a move seen as the industry's first acknowledgment of "aerotoxic syndrome".

The condition, long denied by airlines, is feared to be responsible for several deaths of pilots and crew and hundreds of incidents where pilots have fallen ill, sometimes at the controls. Frequent flyers and young children could also be affected, it is claimed.

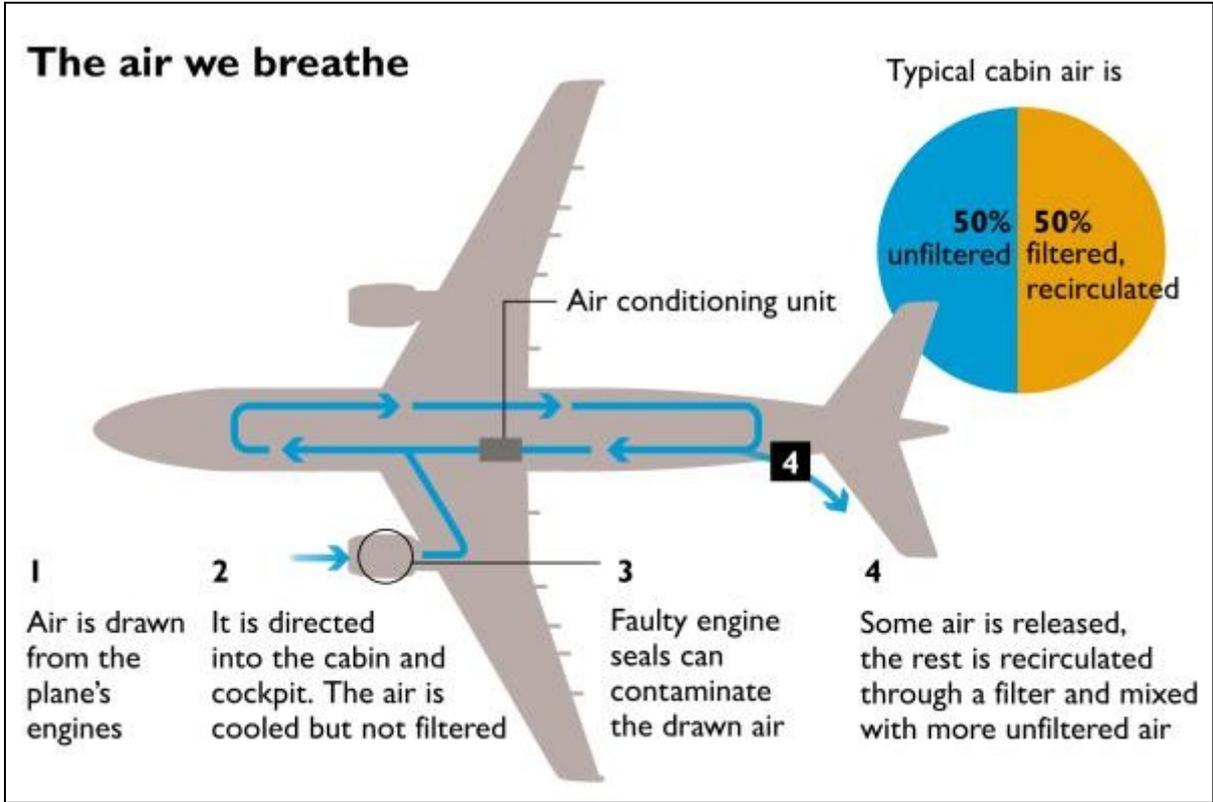
EasyJet told The Sunday Times that “health concerns” had led it to work with a commercial supplier, Pall Aerospace, to “develop and design a new cabin air filtration system” for testing on the company’s aircraft next year.

It can also be revealed that the NHS has set up a “care pathway” for victims of aircraft fume events, including referral to a specialist clinic at St Thomas’ Hospital in London. A note explaining the move, published by the Civil Aviation Authority, stated: “There is strong evidence that some people experience acute symptoms as a consequence of fume events.”

Tristan Lorraine, a former British Airways captain who claims toxic cabin air forced him from his job, said: “This is the first public acknowledgment by an airline of a problem which this industry, including my own airline, has spent decades denying. I congratulate easyJet for having the vision and courage which no other airline had.”

His group, the [Global Cabin Air Quality Executive](#), will hold a [conference in London](#) this week where David Stein, Pall’s vice-president for aerospace research and development, will describe the trial.

Alex Flynn, head of campaigns at the Unite union, which represents cabin crew, said the easyJet move was “highly significant and welcome”.



He said Unite was involved in about 100 UK civil court actions for death and injury allegedly caused by cabin air, a far higher number than previously reported. A “handful” of cases had already been settled by airlines, although without any admission of liability.

During high-altitude flight the atmosphere is too thin to breathe so compressed air, or “bleed air”, is drawn from the plane’s engines and directed into the passenger cabin and cockpit. It is cooled but not filtered. Faults in engine seals can contaminate it with engine oil, hydraulic fluids and lubricants. Some air is then recirculated through a filter, but a typical aircraft cabin consists of half recirculated filtered air and half unfiltered bleed air.

The new “total filtration” system being tested by easyJet will for the first time filter the bleed air as well. It also includes a contamination detector. EasyJet insisted it was not taking a position on aerotoxic syndrome, which “remains an area of scientific uncertainty”.

At least 292 incidents of fumes or smoke in British aircraft were recorded between June 2014 and May 2015. Illness was reported in 96 cases. Last October crew on a BA Airbus A380 from San Francisco to London were left “spaced out” and “vomiting” after what the captain described as “toxic fumes” leaked into the cabin. The jet diverted to Vancouver where the crew was taken to hospital.

UK fatalities allegedly linked to cabin fumes include Matt Bass, a BA flight attendant who died in his sleep in 2014. Toxic organophosphates — found in substances such as jet engine oil — were discovered in his body, an inquest heard last year. The hearing will resume shortly.

In 2012 a BA first officer, Richard Westgate, died after claiming he had been poisoned by cabin air.

Airlines concede that cabin fumes can cause short-term discomfort, but cite independent studies that found “concerns about significant risk to the health of airline passengers and crew are not substantiated”. In June, however, a report by a World Health Organisation journal found that contaminated aircraft air “can reasonably be linked to acute and chronic symptoms, findings and diagnoses, thus establishing causation”.

Additional reporting: Kate Leahy