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Pillow talk

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« Living

When airlines started charging for blankets and pillows earlier this year, passengers and savvy retailers figured out a work-around.

Travel pillows — considered by many as essential to comfy cruising — began appearing at airport kiosks, chain linen stores such as Bed Bath & Beyond, and smaller upscale shops such as the Linen Gallery in Regency.

AAA Nebraska noticed an uptick in sales, too, said Linda Shanahan, field manager for the Omaha and Bellevue branches.

Some larger airports offer U-shaped neck pillows, in white and other neutral shades. (Eppley Airfield's shops don't have the pillows.) A wider selection of styles is available from Bed Bath & Beyond.

The Linen Gallery has styles that are in a traditional pillow shape, although smaller, and a variety of covers or shams for that size. Some stores even offer sports-team colors and logos.

Most of the rectangular styles are small enough — about 12 by 16 inches — to stuff into a carry-on bag. Even the U-shaped pillows easily fit around your bag's lift-up handle as you move from place to place.

Prices range from about \$10 to more than \$100.

For some, owning your own pillow beats using a pillow someone else has used.

Dr. Anne O'Keefe, a senior epidemiologist with the Douglas County Health Department in Omaha, said that's probably not a valid concern. Most viruses and bacteria die after being exposed to air, for even a short amount of time.

"It's more important that people wash their hands well," she said, "instead of worrying about pillows and pillowcases."

However, having a pillow that keeps your spine — neck and lower back — in alignment is a worthy idea, said Dr. Gib Willett, an orthopedic physical therapist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

"Airplane seats are not ergonomically designed. They're economically designed. They force your spine into more of a C shape when it ought to be an S shape. Pillows support that inward shape of your neck and lower back."

The doctor said your jacket or a rolled-up towel with masking tape to hold it in place can provide the lumbar support of a pillow at no cost. Even so, for sanitary reasons, most people prefer to have their own pillows, said Rose White, public affairs director for AAA Nebraska.

There are a couple of other advantages, White said. On long flights, a pillow is a comfortable way to settle in for a nap. And it can keep you from tilting toward your neighbor's shoulder.

More importantly, Willett said, the pillow may prevent a passenger from having a stiff neck.

Omahan Cathy Bonnesen likes her travel pillow that unfolds to become a cover for a standard hotel pillow.

"I didn't think I wanted one until my daughter said she loves hers so much," Bonnesen said.

She gave her "on-the-move" daughters pillows last December. The daughter who is a college student was planning to travel abroad, staying in hostels and living out of a backpack from January through May.

Now that she's home, she says the pillow is her favorite thing, her mother said.

That was enough of an endorsement for Bonnesen. She bought one of the travel pillows for her trip to Italy in April.

"I was going first class but the pillows aren't that great, and you don't get to keep them," she said.

Travel Pillows

Therapedic U-Shaped Pillow, \$20, Bed Bath & Beyond, or www.therapedic.com/bedbathandbeyond. Features include: reusable hot-cold gel pack to relax muscles; velour cover; sculpted, high-density memory foam; removable, machine-washable cover; measures 8 by 16 by 4 inches.

Magniflex Comfort Plus Travel Pillow, \$80, Magniflex in SoHo: 646-330-5483, or www.Magniflex.com. Features include: ergonomic design; hypoallergenic cover; memory foam; removable, washable cover; measures 12 by 20 by 3.5 inches.

Butterfly Pillow by Hollandia, \$15, at www.HollandiaInternational.com. Features include: butterfly-like shape; more than 200 colors and fabrics; side handles for easy positioning and toting; soft, cushy, machine washable; measures 16 by 8 by 6 inches.

PureContour Dual Pillow by Relax the Back, \$119, www.relaxtheback.com. Features EcoMemoryFoam; various thicknesses (3.5, 4.5, 5.5 inches) and two sizes, queen and king; removable, washable bamboo cover.