

## Airplane mode on flights: what really happens if you skip it?

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 31 March, 2026



**Dhaka: Most air travelers have heard the instruction to enable airplane mode before a flight takes off, but few fully understand the reasoning — and some have simply forgotten to do it altogether. So what actually happens when a passenger doesn't comply?**

According to pilot and flight instructor Gary Coxe, who has logged 7,000 flight hours across jets, helicopters, and gliders, the answer is straightforward: "Not a darn thing." An anonymous Washington-based airline mechanic echoed the sentiment.

However, most aviation experts acknowledge a subtler concern. A pilot and U.S. Army veteran known as PerchPoint on TikTok explained in a December 2024 video — which garnered 1.2 million views — that phones not in airplane mode can interfere with cockpit headsets. Even

three or four passengers on a Boeing 737 attempting cellular connections could introduce radio wave interference, making audio from the control tower less clear.

Pilots depend heavily on headset communications, particularly during takeoff and landing, when most aviation accidents occur. PerchPoint compared the interference to the buzzing of a mosquito — manageable, but irritating.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) declined to confirm whether any accidents have been linked to passengers ignoring airplane mode. However, it maintains that personal electronic devices are only permissible in-flight if they do not affect safety or communications systems. The FAA follows guidance from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which banned in-flight cell phone use in 1991 over interference concerns.

By 2013, the FCC revisited its stance. Advances in technology led to a revised position allowing phone use in airplane mode. A study by the International Air Transport Association covering 2003 to 2009 found only 29 suspected cases of cell phone-related electronic interference.

Regulations differ significantly in Europe. Passengers flying within the United Kingdom and European Union are not required to activate airplane mode, and some airlines even permit calls and texts. Since June 2023, EU member airlines have been mandated to equip aircraft with "picocell" technology — essentially a portable cell tower connected via satellite — following a European Commission directive approving in-flight 5G.

Crucially, European 5G networks operate on lower frequencies, unlike their American counterparts, which run on higher frequencies capable of interfering with aircraft systems. This distinction means the FAA, which last updated its airplane mode policy in 2017, is unlikely to adopt a similar approach in the near term.

Non-compliance can carry real consequences. In 2016, a British passenger on a Flybe flight from Amsterdam to Exeter was fined over GBP 500 for refusing to comply. In 2018, another passenger was removed from a flight departing Indiana over a dispute about her phone's status.

Practical benefits aside from safety also favor airplane mode. A phone not searching for cell towers consumes significantly less battery. For most travelers, the enforced digital detox at cruising altitude may be the most valuable perk of all.

**V**