

Taking Flight

During Flu Season

When faced with essential travel, practice these smart strategies to limit viral exposure

By Skye Sherman

While influenza viruses can be detected year-round in the United States, they're most common during fall and winter, a period commonly known as flu season. Exact timing and duration of flu season varies, but flu activity tends to increase in October, peak between December and February, and last as late as May.

This year, with the added burden of the COVID-19 pandemic weighing on society, flu season will be more complicated than ever. The two viruses have some similarities and some differences, but both can spread through droplets in

the air from an infected person coughing, sneezing, or talking, and both cause similar symptoms, such as fever, cough, body aches, fatigue, congestion or runny nose, and sometimes vomiting and diarrhea. However, one can significantly decrease the risk of catching either through frequent and thorough hand washing, wearing a mask, limiting contact with others, and staying home.

But what if staying home is not an option? How will this double-whammy of contagious respiratory illnesses in circulation affect travel during flu season? And what measures can travelers take to protect themselves?

"It will likely be riskier to travel than during a time without COVID-19," acknowledges Thomas





Reusable fabric masks need to be washed in hot water on a regular basis, so be sure to stock up on to-go detergent packs.

TRAVEL SAFETY DOS AND DON'TS

Do

- Wear a mask any time you're around others.
- Disinfect all high-touch surfaces in transit and upon arrival.
- Gravitate toward outdoor activities.
- Cancel your trip if you feel unwell.

Don't

- Touch your face, nose, eyes, or mouth.
- Eat from buffets as they abound with high-touch communal surfaces.
- Enter crowded locations where maintaining a safe distance is impossible.
- Forget to wash and sanitize your hands regularly.



Cleare, PhD, MBA, assistant vice president of planning and community engagement at the Health Care District of Palm Beach County. "Air travel involves being in very close quarters with a lot of people in a closed environment for a long period of time. Airlines are taking a lot of precautions and passengers are wearing masks during flights, but it's still a much higher risk to travel than it would be for someone to stay home."

Don't be caught off guard by long security lines at the airport, crowded airplanes, and close seating on buses and trains, Cleare adds. "It's very difficult to stay 6 feet apart from others in those situations." Postponing travel may be best if you're not comfortable with the dicey circumstances—and if you feel sick even in the slightest, it's your civic duty to stay home.

Before committing to a trip, do your research. According to Cleare, travelers should check their destination for COVID-19 activity. "COVID-19 hot spots seem to develop in new areas while other areas might be seeing a leveling-off or decline in the number of cases," he says.

Investigate not only the prevalence of COVID-19 in the region where you plan to travel, but also the specific protocols your intended airline, accommodations, and destination have in place, and decide if you're comfortable with those measures. Some cities, states, and countries require visitors to self-quarantine for 14 days, and

upon return, some local governments require the same of any citizen who has traveled.

While most establishments from sea to shining sea have enacted preventative measures such as ramped-up cleaning efforts and staff health screenings, ultimately, it's up to individual travelers to protect themselves. Wearing a proper facial covering, keeping distance from others, and practicing proactive hygiene remain three of the most important steps travelers can take to minimize their exposure to any kind of virus.

Beware that if you contract COVID-19 while away from home, you will be responsible for all costs associated with your isolation or quarantine, including transportation, lodging, food, medical care, and any other expenses. Consider

purchasing a travel health insurance policy if your existing insurance doesn't cover services performed outside of your home region.

In addition, one of the best precautions for travel during flu season is to get the flu vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends an annual flu vaccine for everyone 6 months and older. Since it can take two weeks for immunity to develop after receiving the vaccine, travelers should time the vaccination properly. Keep in mind that flu season varies around the world: In the Southern Hemisphere, like in Australia and most of South America, for example, it runs April through September.

Because there is no vaccine yet available for COVID-19, travelers must exercise extreme caution and avoid exposure. It also wouldn't

hurt to boost your immune system with healthy eating, ample sleep, exercise, and vitamins as recommended by a physician before your trip.

If you are in a high-risk category, begin to feel unwell, have had contact with a sick person within 14 days, or exhibit symptoms of illness, flu-like or otherwise, scrap your travel plans. Otherwise, monitor official reports to watch for lockdowns or spikes in COVID-19 activity in the area where you plan to travel.

If your destination closes to visitors, you'll need to make other arrangements or cancel your trip. As of press time, the U.S. Department of State continues to advise Americans to avoid all international travel and the CDC recommends deferring cruise travel for the foreseeable future. «

Suitcase Essentials

Beyond now-routine items like face masks, disinfecting wipes, and hand sanitizer containing at least 60 percent alcohol, pack a travel kit with the below gear to safeguard against both the flu and COVID-19



1 You may be subject to a temperature check at the airport and other establishments—don't let your results come as a surprise. Self-monitor with a touchless travel thermometer. The Withings Thermo smart thermometer (\$100) offers color-coded fever indicators and syncs with an app to track readings. withings.com

2 Convenience stores and vending machines aren't worth undue exposure. Limit pit stops and person-to-person exchanges by packing your own snacks, straws, and cutlery in reusable silicone or fabric bags from One World Zero Waste. The Tequesta-based company offers individual bags (starting at \$9) as well as lunch sets with a hard-wood spork and stainless-steel straw (\$22). oneworld-zerowaste.com

3 Smartphones collect bacteria all day long and putting them to our face is second nature. Clean and charge on the go with the PhoneSoap Go portable UV phone sanitizer (\$100), which can sustain 45 sanitizing cycles on a single charge. phonesoap.com



4 Low blood-oxygen saturation levels can be a sign of COVID-19. A digital pulse oximeter like the Wellue O2Ring (\$179) provides continuous monitoring and vibrates if your oxygen levels fall below 94 percent. getwellue.com