

IATA questions need for expensive PCR Tests

A Monitor Report

Date: 01 August, 2021



Geneva : Regulations are conflicting and confusing. Arriving in the United States means an inexpensive and often free antigen test is fine while continuing to Hawaii, the many times more expensive PCR test is required.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) called on governments to take action to address the high cost of Covid-19 tests in many jurisdictions and urged flexibility in permitting the use of cost-effective antigen tests as an alternative to more expensive PCR tests.

IATA also recommended governments adopt recent World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance to consider exempting vaccinated travellers from testing requirements.

According to IATA's most recent traveler survey, 86 per cent of respondents are willing to get tested. But 70 per cent also believe that the cost of testing is a significant barrier to travel, while 78 per cent believe governments should bear the cost of mandatory testing.

"IATA supports Covid-19 testing as a pathway to reopening borders to international travel. But our support is not unconditional. In addition to being reliable, testing needs to be easily accessible, affordable, and appropriate to the risk level. Too many governments, however, are falling short on some or all of these. The cost of testing varies widely between jurisdictions, with little relation to the actual cost of conducting the test. The UK is the poster child for governments failing to

adequately manage to test.”

“At best it is expensive, at worst extortionate. And in either case, it is a scandal that the government is charging VAT,” said Willie Walsh, Director-General, IATA.

The new generation of rapid tests costs less than USD 10 per test. Provided a confirmatory rRT-PCR test is administered for positive test results, WHO guidance sees Ag-RDT antigen testing as an acceptable alternative to PCR. And, where testing is a mandatory requirement, the WHO's International Health Regulations (IHRs) state that neither passengers nor carriers should bear the cost of testing.

Testing also needs to be appropriate to the threat level. For example, in the UK, the latest National Health Service data on testing arriving travelers show that more than 1.37 million tests were conducted on arrivals from so-called Amber countries. Just 1 per cent tested positive over four months. Meanwhile, nearly three times that number of positive cases are being detected in the general population daily.

"Data from the UK government confirms that international travellers pose little to no risk of importing Covid-19 compared to existing levels of infection in the country. At the very least, therefore, the UK government should follow WHO guidance and accept antigen tests that are fast, affordable, and effective, with a confirmatory PCR test for those who test positive. This could be a pathway for enabling even unvaccinated people to access to travel," Walsh said.

Restarting international travel is vital to supporting the 46 million travel and tourism jobs around the world that rely on aviation. "Our latest survey confirms that the high cost of testing will bear heavily on the shape of the travel recovery. It makes little sense for governments to take steps to reopen borders if those steps make the cost of travel prohibitive to most people. We need a restart that is affordable for all," said Walsh.