

COVID-19 test rule begins for international flights to the US

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Washington, DC: As of Tuesday, January 26, travelers boarding international flights to the United States have a big hurdle to clear.

For the first time since the coronavirus pandemic began, all passengers ages 2 and older must present a negative coronavirus test taken no more than three days before their flight or proof they recovered from the virus within the past three months. Those who don't will be denied boarding. Canada, the United Kingdom, and many other countries already had this entry requirement.

The new U.S. requirement was announced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Jan. 12 and formalized in President Joe Biden's executive order on COVID-19 safety in domestic and international travel last week. It significantly broadens a CDC order on Christmas Eve that required tests for passengers flying into the U.S. from the United Kingdom.

Masks a must: Biden signs order mandating masks on planes

The goal, of course: to help stop the spread of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. International travel is still severely restricted around the globe, but U.S.

vacationers craving a getaway have been flocking to beaches in Mexico and the Caribbean in part because of a lack of restrictions in many destinations.

There were 2.1 million international passenger arrivals in the United States from Dec. 1 to Dec. 28, an average of 76,000 passengers a day and quadruple the number of passengers in June, Martin Cetron, director of the CDC's Division of Global Migration and Quarantine, told USA TODAY.

There is already evidence the testing requirement, which means travelers have to find a place to get tested during their vacation and risk being stranded if they test positive, is having an effect. United Airlines said last week that it has seen an increase in cancellations and a decline in bookings to Mexican beach resorts since the rule was announced.

Tammy McQuitty took a New Year's trip with her family to Cancun and felt safe with the COVID-19 protocols in place, so she and her husband planned a trip to Puerto Vallarta for February. The frequent travelers from Colorado Springs, Colorado, visit Mexico two to three times a year.

They canceled the Puerto Vallarta trip the day after the CDC announced the testing requirement. There were just too many unknowns, McQuitty said.

"What if one of us tests positive and one of us doesn't? Where do we stay? What do we do?" she said. "Everything was so up in the air it was absolutely not worth the risk."

The Secrets resort they booked through American Airlines vacations is offering an insurance policy of sorts, a free stay of up to 14 days if they were forced to stay in Mexico, and quarantine after testing positive for their return flight. (The policy is in effect through March 31.)

"I'm like, 'There's got to be some kind of catch in that because that's an awful lot of money they're going to lose,'" she said.

The couple plan to visit Savannah, Georgia, instead.

The U.S. State Department on Monday reminded travelers about the new rule and reiterated its stance that U.S. citizens should reconsider nonessential travel abroad.

It cited three new risks travelers face given the new requirement: testing availability and turnaround times; possible stranding abroad if someone tests positive; and difficulty accessing or financing medical care in a foreign country.

7 things to know about the new COVID-19 test requirement on flights to US

1. Yes, U.S. citizens are subject to the new rules.
2. No, you aren't exempt if you've had a COVID-19 vaccine.
3. Yes, you can avoid a test by submitting two things before your flight home: test results that show you had COVID-19 within the past three months and a note from a health care provider or public health official that states that you have recovered and been cleared for travel.

4. No, airlines won't be testing you when you arrive at the airport for an international flight to the U.S. Travelers are on their own to obtain the required test, which must be taken no more than three days before your departure date. Hotels from the swank Atlantis in the Bahamas to timeshare resorts throughout the region have rushed to add on-site testing for guests, so check in advance to see what's available and add the cost to your vacation budget. Make sure you make a reservation for a test if offered in case slots fill up quickly.

For more information on testing options in international destinations, check the websites and social media accounts of U.S. embassies. The U.S. Embassy in Mexico has assembled a list of private providers throughout the country, and so has the embassy in Costa Rica.

5. No, you don't need to get a test before your flight out of the U.S. if you're headed to certain destinations, including Mexico. You will, though, if you're headed to select Caribbean destinations, Canada, the United Kingdom, and scores of other countries with entry restrictions. Check with your airline and destination for details.

Traveling within the U.S.? Coronavirus tests aren't required to board a plane, though some destinations, most notably Hawaii, require you to quarantine if you don't receive a negative test result before departure.

6. Yes, airlines are trying to make it easier to stay up to date on new COVID-19 travel restrictions and organize test results and other documents while avoiding logjams at the airport. United Airlines on Monday announced a new "travel-ready" center on its mobile app and website.

United Airlines has added new features to its mobile app to help travelers stay on top of COVID-19 travel restrictions.

And American Airlines over the weekend expanded the use of the VeriFLY app, a mobile health passport where travelers can upload test results and other required documents, for passengers traveling to the U.S. from all international destinations. Previously, the option was available to passengers traveling from the U.S. to places with entry restrictions, including Jamaica, Chile, Colombia, and Guatemala.

7. No, there is no mandatory quarantine when you return to or arrive in the United States. It is recommended by the CDC and President Joe Biden, however. The CDC recommends that travelers get tested three to five days after travel and stay home or in a hotel to self-quarantine for seven days post-travel regardless of the test results.

If you don't get tested after the trip, the CDC says "it's safest" to stay home for 10 days. Biden's executive order states that travelers arriving in the U.S. from an international destination are "required to comply with other applicable CDC guidelines concerning international travel, including recommended periods of self-quarantine or self-isolation after entry into the United States."

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