

Omicron doubles infection risk on flights: IATA's medical adviser

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Dhaka: Omicron could double the risk of being infected with coronavirus during a flight, said Dr David Powell, Medical Adviser of International Air Transport Association (IATA) on December 21.

However, he warned, the airport carries a higher likelihood that the virus could spread than on the aircraft itself.

“Whatever the risk was with Delta, we would have to assume the risk would be two to three times greater with Omicron, just as we’ve seen in other environments,” Dr David Powell added.

Powell claimed that the risk of catching Covid-19 caused by the Delta variant on a flight had been “low”, though the exact level of that possibility had been unclear.

Most of the data about the transmission of the virus on aircraft was from March 2020 before there was easily available testing, masks, organised boarding procedures, and a high degree of awareness about not flying if you were unwell.

According to reports, Powell mentioned the requirements for air flows on board a plane

were generally “much more stringent” than they were for airports.

In an airport, he noted, “There’s much more random movement, much more potential for face-to-face contact. You’ve got generally reduced air flows.”

He estimated that airport ventilation rates were about a tenth of what they are during a flight.

Sheldon H Jacobson, Professor of Computer Science at University of Illinois, who also studies public health and aviation security, recently warned that the “riskiest” part of air travel was the time before and after flights.

“Waiting in a terminal before boarding is a vulnerable time and environment for virus spread,” he said, according to reports.

The highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus has been confirmed in over 100 countries. In the US, Omicron went from making up 0.7 per cent of Covid-19 cases to 73 per cent of cases in just two weeks.

Powell added that the advice remains the same to protect against Omicron as Delta: Wear a mask, wash hands frequently, use alcohol-based hand sanitiser, avoid common-touch surfaces, and get vaccinated or boosted.

He further noted that the biggest risk on an aircraft itself is sitting next to someone who is ill. If a passenger finds himself close to somebody who is clearly sick, then they should let the cabin crew know, Powell advised.