



Safely Reopening Borders: Facilitating Air Travel for Vaccinated Passengers

Position Paper

Background

There is now considerable and mounting evidence that vaccination results in a very high levels of reduction in both infection and onward transmission of COVID-19 by vaccinated individuals. As a result, the importation risk associated with vaccinated travelers is very significantly reduced, relative to non-vaccinated travelers.

Key Points

- IATA considers that vaccinated travelers should not be required to self-isolate or quarantine and that testing requirements should be waived or modified for vaccinated travelers.
 - This position is aligned with [policy and technical guidance](#) published by the World Health Organization (WHO) which recommends that States “consider a risk-based approach to the facilitation of international travel by lifting measures, such as testing and/or quarantine requirements” for travelers who are fully vaccinated with a vaccine that has been listed for emergency use by the WHO or approved by a stringent regulator. WHO also advises considering lifting these measures who have natural immunity from a prior infection.
 - The position is also consistent with research findings from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (US CDC), the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC) and the Robert Koch Institute, Germany (RKI).
- A growing number of countries have removed or modified quarantine or testing requirements for fully vaccinated travelers, or announced firms plans to introduce such amended protocols. IATA encourages all governments to follow these best-practice examples as part of a risk-based approach to safely reopening borders and restarting international air travel.
- While the relaxation of certain prevention measures for fully vaccinated people may provide a strong incentive to get vaccinated where vaccine hesitancy is a concern, vaccination should not be a mandatory requirement for international travel.

Scientific evidence supports recognition of vaccination status for travelers

A growing body of scientific research shows that vaccination results in a very high level of reduction in both susceptibility to and transmission of COVID-19 by vaccinated individuals.

- Reduced susceptibility: A [comprehensive study](#) from Israel found that fully vaccinated individuals were much less susceptible to SARS-COV2 than the non-vaccinated population: 95% less likely to contract symptomatic COVID-19 and 92% less likely to get asymptomatic disease.
- Reduced onward transmission: Two UK-based observational studies (one focused on [healthcare workers](#) and one on the [general population](#)) report that vaccination reduces the risk of onward



transmission by more than 50%. This is supported by further data from [Israel](#) which suggest that vaccinated individuals who do contract COVID-19 have a viral load several times lower than unvaccinated people; this is significant because viral load has been identified as a key driver of transmission.

In its systematic review of the emerging evidence, the [Robert Koch Institute](#) in Germany concludes that “... *COVID-19 vaccination significantly reduces virus transmission and that fully vaccinated individuals no longer play a significant role in the epidemiology of the disease.*” Both the US CDC and ECDC have reached similar conclusions regarding the effectiveness of vaccination in reducing the risks associated with international travel and accordingly both organizations recommend alleviation of some or all measures for vaccinated travelers.

Noting that transmission risk is likely to be substantially reduced in vaccinated people, the [US CDC](#) concludes that while the risks of SARS CoV-2 infection in fully vaccinated people cannot be completely eliminated in the setting of continued widespread community transmission of the virus, the benefits of avoiding disruptions such as unnecessary quarantine and social isolation may outweigh these potential residual risks. Regarding the application of public health measures for travelers, the CDC reports that “*with a 90% effective vaccine, pre-travel testing, post-travel testing, and 7-day self-quarantine provide minimal additional benefit*”.

Similarly, the [ECDC](#) concludes that, “*the likelihood of an infected vaccinated person transmitting the disease is currently assessed to be very low to low*” and recommends that “*requirements for testing and quarantine of travelers... can be waived or modified for fully vaccinated individuals as long as there is no or very low level circulation of immune escape variants in the community in the country of origin*”.

With regards to vaccine efficacy against variants of the SARS-CoV2 virus, [IATA's review of the available medical evidence](#) finds that the mRNA vaccines in wide distribution (Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna) retain reasonably strong effectiveness overall against all the currently identified variants. Moreover, most current vaccines appear effective in preventing severe disease, hospitalization and death. Among the variants of concern, there is some evidence of reduced antibody neutralization and efficacy for the B.1.351 variant, particularly with the AstraZeneca vaccine. Emerging variants will need to be monitored for any evidence of reduced efficacy in certain locations.

WHO recommends consideration of vaccination status as part of a risk-based approach

On 2 July 2021, the WHO published updated policy and technical guidance for implementing a risk-based approach to international travel in the context of COVID-19. This guidance acknowledges that vaccines have demonstrated high levels of protective efficacy against COVID-19 disease and that the emerging data points to a reduction in transmission of the SARS-COV2 virus.

WHO recommends that States consider a risk-based approach to the facilitation of international travel by lifting measures, such as testing and/or quarantine requirements, for individual travelers who are fully vaccinated, at least two weeks prior to travelling, with COVID-19 vaccines listed by WHO for emergency use or approved by a stringent regulatory authority.

However, the WHO also recommends that vaccination should not be the only pathway to international travel and that if testing and/or quarantine requirements are lifted for fully vaccinated travelers, alternatives to travel for individuals who are unvaccinated or do not have proof of past infection, such as through the use of negative PCR or rapid antigen tests.

Recognition of vaccination may create an incentive to get vaccinated...

The US CDC notes that the potential for vaccination to enable alleviation from certain prevention measures may create a powerful motivator for vaccination, particularly in communities where sufficient supply of



vaccines is available but where vaccine hesitancy is prevalent. IATA polling indicates that a significant majority of international travelers (81%) is willing to get vaccinated in order to travel. Moreover, 74% of people in the same poll agreed that those vaccinated should be able to travel by air without restrictions.

...But vaccination should not be a mandatory requirement for international travel

However, in line with guidance from the World Health Organization, COVID vaccination should not be a mandatory government requirement for quarantine-free international travel. Mandating vaccination would discriminate against travelers from markets where vaccination is not widely available. Moreover, it would discriminate against those individuals who are not able to get vaccinated due to medical reasons or who are unwilling to do so due to ethical or other concerns. Governments should put in place time-limited, risk-based testing strategies that enable quarantine-free international travel for non-vaccinated persons.