Contact Tracing and Air Travel
Position Paper

Summary

- Airlines and the wider aviation industry have implemented a range of measures to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission at the airport and during flights. It is widely acknowledged that the risk of transmission of the virus during air travel is very low.

- Most scientists now expect that COVID-19 will become endemic over time and that we will need to live it and manage it. While vaccination and testing are critical, they will not eliminate the risk of transmission.

- Many governments are using systematic testing and vaccination as the primary tools to help reduce transmission and to mitigate the risks of importation of the virus and new variants. In addition, some governments collect passenger information to help trace and contact passengers if someone becomes ill with COVID-19 during or in the days after they travel.

- However, to further mitigate risk, effective contact tracing applications need to be put in place within countries so that health authorities can stop clusters of infection from spreading into the community. This capability to contain outbreaks immediately has been demonstrated in countries such as Australia, South Korea and Singapore which have successfully suppressed the virus.

- IATA urges governments to use International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and World Health Organization (WHO) guidance to put in place effective national contact tracing mechanisms as part of their risk mitigation measures for COVID-19. This capability will enable international travel to resume without border closures or restrictions being the primary method of defence against COVID-19.

Background

In addition to the loss of life and impact on public health, COVID-19 has caused unprecedented disruption to the global economy and society, destroying jobs and devastating livelihoods. Many governments are keen to reopen borders as soon as the public health situation allows. Restoring international air connectivity will help power the global recovery from the pandemic.

IATA is urging governments to work with the industry on roadmaps that set out a clear plan for the progressive reopening of borders without restrictions as the public health situation allows. The aviation industry has already implemented significant new measures to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus during the air travel journey. Effective testing and vaccination also have significant roles in a multi-layered risk mitigation strategy.

However, risk cannot be eliminated especially as the virus becomes endemic. Governments must extend the contact tracing capabilities beyond solely collecting self-declared health data from international arriving passengers. This will give governments and health authorities greater confidence that **any** outbreaks of Covid-19, irrespective of their origin, can be managed effectively without the need to close borders or impose damaging travel restrictions. This position sets out IATA's approach to contact tracing relating to air travel and the need for effective national contact tracing capabilities.

Contact tracing relating to international air travel

The experience gained during the COVID-19 outbreak has made it clear that there is a need for a temporary process for collecting additional health information from passengers. The health data currently being collected is self-declarative, and may include a person's identity, health conditions, contact details for tracing purposes and travel history.Several states have set up government dedicated websites where passengers can enter the required information (e.g.: health declaration, recent

travel history, additional contact information, possible contacts with infected individuals) before traveling, sometimes up to three days before departure. The information is then recorded directly in the state's database. Examples of countries that have successfully developed such government portals include Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam (non-exhaustive list).

Identity management remains a responsibility of national authorities, even more so during health outbreaks. IATA firmly believes that setting up government web portals supplemented optionally by mobile applications is the most efficient and cost-effective solution for passengers to provide necessary data to authorities during the COVID-19 crisis and in the future.

The collection of self-declared passenger health data is a transaction that must occur solely between passengers and authorities. IATA does not support making airlines responsible for such collection. While these web portals are temporary measures to be deployed for addressing a specific health outbreak, they can quickly be reinstated when needed, based on experience gained with previous pandemics.

IATA does not support paper-based declarations as they increase processing time at airports and therefore the risks of transmission. The use of in-country digital contact tracing can stop clusters of infection from spreading into the community. The ability to identify and stop outbreaks and community transmission immediately will be key to a sustainable recovery of international travel and global connectivity.

Beyond travel – the need for effective national contract tracing

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes contact tracing along with robust testing, isolation, and care of cases as a key strategy for interrupting chains of transmission of COVID-19 and reducing mortality. The trigger to commence contact tracing is detection of a probable or confirmed case. Individuals who have been in contact with this case are identified and instructed to quarantine to avoid further transmission of the virus.

Identifying the source of infections through case investigation (known as 'backward tracing') is key to detecting unrecognized chains of transmission and common points of exposure. Case investigations can help to identify additional contacts at particularly high risk of becoming ill with COVID-19. At national level, source investigations help identify risk factors and allow development of targeted public health and social measures. Moreover, the WHO notes that *"As COVID-19 vaccines begin to deploy in many countries, it remains important to enhance existing public health strategies like contact tracing and quarantine to stop further transmission".*[1]

In the context of international travel, community-level contact tracing is an important complement to measures applied during the travel experience and at the border and therefore play a role as part of a multi-layered, risk-based approach. If States have effective contact tracing as a back-stop and can stop clusters of infection from spreading into the community, this should increase their confidence to reopen borders as will they be able to contain any imported outbreaks.

Therefore, IATA urges States to go beyond simply collecting data to allow contact tracing of international arrivals and use the comprehensive guidance developed by ICAO and WHO to establish robust national contact tracing capacity for the control of COVID-19. The WHO guidance sets out how to prioritize contact tracing activities based on local epidemiological situation as well as advice and support on community engagement, data, and digital applications.

Conclusions
- International air travel remains approximately 86.6% down compared to 2019 levels during the first two months of 2021 because of travel restrictions[2]

- Being able to identify, trace and contact those who may have been exposed to individuals that have contracted COVID-19 and have them quarantine will be critical for governments to manage COVID-19 as it becomes endemic.

- Contact tracing should not just focus on the capability to trace and contact international arriving travellers in the immediate period after their travel.

- To effectively manage COVID-19 governments should put in place effective contact tracing capabilities that allow them to identify, contain and stop any community outbreaks.

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[1] https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/contact-tracing-in-the-context-of-covid-19
[2] https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2021-04-21-01/