COVID Testing and Reopening of Borders

Summary

- Testing will continue to be an important tool in the effort to reopen borders safely, due to the estimated amount of time needed for global vaccine rollout.
- Many governments are implementing testing regimes to facilitate travel. IATA welcomes these developments. Trials have shown that COVID testing can significantly reduce the risk of the virus being spread by air travel.
- Testing should be implemented in a way that minimizes cost, delays, and inconvenience for travelers. This will involve testing solutions being accurate, affordable, and available widely.
- Countries implementing testing should consider accepting different testing technologies to increase consumer choice and access to tests. Governments should ensure that travelers have easy access to clear information about testing requirements.
- Global standards for testing and testing certificates should be agreed through ICAO so that tests administered in one jurisdiction on departure are accepted by other jurisdictions on arrival.

Governments must find alternatives to border closures and quarantines
Travel and border restrictions, including quarantines, are causing economic devastation and have brought the international aviation industry to a virtual standstill. There is an urgent need to learn to live with the virus and find alternative solutions to enable international travel to resume to safeguard the immense economic and social contribution that air travel supports. The WHO has acknowledged that travel bans cannot continue indefinitely. The challenge therefore becomes a practical one related to reopening borders safely in a way which minimizes the risk of international spread of COVID-19.

COVID testing provides a solution. Many governments are implementing such testing regimes to facilitate travel, which IATA supports. Germany and the US, for example, are taking advantage of the rapid improvement in testing technologies to accept PCR and antigen testing to safely manage the risks of travel. While rapid antigen tests are preferred for their speed and cost advantages, it is clear that PCR testing will play a role as many governments are requiring tests within a 48- to 72-hour window prior to travel.

Testing of international travelers can significantly reduce risk
A number of COVID testing trials have been run around the world, delivering positive results in terms of risk reduction.

Canada
A trial run by McMaster’s Health Labs (MHL) in collaboration with Air Canada and Toronto airport tested 8,600 volunteer participants upon arrival in Toronto and then at day 7 and day 14 during their quarantine. Overall, the study found that 99% of its study participants tested negative for COVID-19, with 1% testing positive. Of the 1% testing positive for COVID-19, 0.7% detected on arrival; 0.3 detected on day 7; and >0.1% detected on day 14. The results confirmed that a testing regime can provide a viable alternative to a blanket, 14-day quarantine requirement.
Italy
A pre-departure testing program for the Milan Linate-Rome Fiumicino route detected about 0.8% of passengers infected with COVID-19. As this level of incidence is considerably higher than the reported prevalence of COVID-19 in Italy at the time, it would appear that not only was testing highly effective in identifying infected travelers but that systematic testing is the best way to detect asymptomatic cases and to break chains of transmission.

Italy-US
A similar testing pilot conducted by Alitalia and Delta Airlines in partnership with Aeroporti di Roma on the Rome Fiumicino - New York JFK and Rome Fiumicino - Atlanta routes delivered similar results. During the trial phase, only 5 passengers out of 3,824 proved COVID-19 positive – an overall positivity rate of just 0.13%. These figures therefore show that these COVID-19 tested flights had no impact on the prevalence of the virus in the destination market, pointing to testing for air travel as an effective risk control measure without the need to resort to quarantines.

Testing should not represent a barrier to travel
IATA encourages governments to take the following factors into account when designing testing regimes:

- **Accuracy**: Rapid tests should demonstrate very high levels of reliability, both in terms of sensitivity (minimal number of false negatives) and specificity (minimal number of false positives). Test accuracy should be certified by reputable national or international authorities.

- **Speed**: Testing solutions should be able to deliver results quickly, ideally inside 20 minutes in order to avoid unnecessary disruption to the travel process.

- **Scalability and availability**: Support testing at sufficient scale (simultaneous processing of several hundreds of tests per hour) in order to avoid delays and passenger inconvenience. The use of saliva for taking samples would facilitate this and would also be expected to improve passenger acceptance.

- **Ease of Use**: Testing should be straightforward to carry out, both in terms of taking the sample and the use of the testing machines themselves. While it is expected that training will be necessary, testing should not need to be carried out by medical professionals.

- **Affordability**: The cost of testing should not constitute a barrier to travel. The new generation of rapid tests cost less than US$10 per test. 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.

Rapid test technology, and in particular antigen testing, is evolving rapidly and is at a stage where many of these criteria can now be met enabling to be rolled out as a screening method to help accelerate the restart of international travel. Antigen tests are much quicker and cheaper than the existing standard PCR tests and can increasingly deliver comparable levels of accuracy. Over 100 manufacturers and research institutions are involved in the development of antigen tests and at least two manufacturers have announced that the intend large-scale production of antigen testing kits before the end of Q3 2020.

Governments should proactively drive the roll out of rapid tests, for example by fast-tracking the necessary regulatory approvals, and prioritize the travel and tourism sector when it comes to allocating available rapid tests (understanding that initially that the demand for such tests will be greater than the supply).

Passengers support testing
IATA’s public opinion research revealed strong support for COVID-19 testing in the travel process. Some 65% of travelers surveyed agreed that quarantine should not be required if a person tests negative for COVID-19.

Passengers’ support for testing is evident in the following survey results:

- 84% agreed that testing should be required of all travelers
- 88% agreed that they are willing to undergo testing as part of the travel process
In addition to opening borders, public opinion research also indicated that testing will help to rebuild passenger confidence in aviation. Survey respondents identified the implementation of COVID-19 screening measures for all passengers as effective in making them feel safe, second only to mask-wearing. The availability of rapid COVID-19 testing is among the top three signals that travelers will look to for reassurance that travel is safe (along with the availability of a vaccine or a treatment for COVID-19).

**A standardized test certificate to support mutual recognition**

Mutual recognition of tests (both the tests themselves and the results) will be key for reciprocal and safe opening of borders. A standardized approach to documenting test results and communicating this information between governments in a way that facilitates mutual recognition is therefore essential. Aviation is a sector with a high level of standardization, which is a critical facilitator of smooth cross-border operations and interlining. A consistent global approach also encourages safety and security as well as offering increased predictability for passengers.

ICAO is in the process of designing the specifications for a test certificate for travel which could be a component of a health passport. Similarly, WHO is designing the specifications for a smart vaccine certificate that could be used for COVID-19 and other vaccinations. To be of use in an international travel setting, both certificate formats will need to include some data elements related to either the test or the vaccine, as well as additional elements to related to a traveler’s identity (a travel document number for example). IATA encourages all governments to contribute to both initiatives and to align with them.

The ideal scenario is one in which governments enable passengers to upload their test results onto a dedicated traveler portal, with interactions performed directly between passengers and health authorities.

**Link to other biosafety measures**

COVID testing is complementary to the measures contained within the ICAO ‘Take-Off’ guidance and which already provide multiple layers of protection to mitigate the risk of transmission during air travel. Testing also provides a bridge solution while the global rollout of vaccines is underway. IATA also encourages governments to take a more proactive and harmonized approach to contact tracing as yet another layer of risk mitigation, complementing testing and existing bio-safety measures.