



# Face-covering policy for passengers with disabilities travelling during a pandemic

## Introduction

- The requirement to wear face masks onboard aircraft can be imposed by government regulations, and/or by a carrier's contract of carriage.
- Some government regulations regarding accessibility in air travel do not prohibit air carriers from assessing whether a passenger is fit-to-fly. They provide grounds for requiring a medical clearance to support that assessment in situations where the person in question has a medical condition or communicable disease that threatens his or her safe transportation or the health of other passengers and the crew.
- Other government regulations regarding accessibility in air travel do not address communicable diseases, as this is a topic separate from disability<sup>1</sup>.
- Recently, state regulators and airlines have expressed concerns over a possible increase in non-compliance from passengers with health regulations (including those on the wearing of face masks or equivalent face shields). Unfortunately, several member airlines have had to deal with incidents, some of which received high profile reporting in social media for passengers who have refused to wear a face covering.
- At the same time denied boarding and passenger bans have raised criticism on airlines' policies that restrict people with disabilities from accessing air transportation as a violation of anti-discrimination and disability rights regulations.
- This paper intends to clarify the position of IATA members on face-covering for passengers who have disabilities (or underlying medical conditions) that make them unable to wear face-coverings.

## IATA policy position

- IATA recognizes that face-covering for passengers, ground staff, and cabin crew is a critical part of a layered approach to biosafety to allow passengers to travel safely during a pandemic.
- Airlines should provide reasonable accommodation to passengers aligned with measures recommended by states' health authorities. Provision of such accommodation must be consistent with operational feasibility and without compromising the safety of fellow passengers. This will help to ensure that all passengers exercise their human rights and their fundamental freedoms in an equitable manner.
- The type of face-covering (non-medical or medical) should be selected based on the level of risk and the availability of such masks while taking into consideration the potential risks and disadvantages of wearing a specific mask type.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the case for European regulation EC1107/2006 and for the Canadian Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations (ATPDR).



- Best practices should be followed regarding when and how to wear, remove, replace, and dispose of masks and face coverings, as well as the adoption of hand hygiene after removal. It is recommended that the PPE of staff assisting passengers with disabilities be changed after each time assistance is provided to a passenger.
- A general practice, rules applied by a carrier as part of a contract of carriage should be clearly communicated in advance to passengers. Carriers should consider drawing special attention to a requirement to wear a face mask during booking, online check-in, and via other communication channels.
- Some passengers, such as those who cannot put on or remove face masks themselves, very young children, and those who have certain types of medical conditions may not be able to tolerate the use of face coverings or masks for a lengthy period -or at all.
- Airlines should consider this within their risk assessment process and identify whether additional questions are necessary at the pre-screening stage(s) and whether any exceptions in the acceptance of these passengers can be made within their policy. Exceptions should be made in consideration of the health authorities' recommendations and the risk level. Where exceptions are made, other passengers may need to be advised of the reasons and additional steps to mitigate the risks in order to reassure them and prevent discomfort between passengers.
- In the interests of all passengers' safety, a passenger whose medical condition may pose a "direct threat" to his or her safe transportation or to the health of other passengers and the crew may be asked to provide additional medical documentation (e.g. MEDIF2 ) to ensure that they are fit-to-fly.
- The phenomenon of fraudulent claims by passengers to obtain an exemption from the requirement to wear face masks has been drawn to IATA's attention and is of concern. Airlines should consult with their legal department on procedures for addressing the validity of exemption documentation under local government requirements.
- In the implementation of safety measures, care should be taken to follow all applicable laws, regulations, requirements, standards, and guidance issued by relevant sub-national, national, and international authorities. IATA position is not intended to supersede or contradict such requirements.

## SSRs codes on additional documentation checks and mask exemptions

- Airlines may develop their own policies around additional documentation requirements and wearing of masks

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<sup>2</sup> The MEDIF is the name given to the forms used by airlines to manage passengers requiring special assistance and medical clearance. For additional guidance see the IATA medical manual. For example the U.S. Air Carrier Access Act regulations (14 CFR Part 382) define "direct threat" as "a significant risk to the health or safety of others that cannot be eliminated by a modification of policies, practices, or procedures, or by the provision of auxiliary aids or services." In accordance with public health guidelines, this currently includes passengers whose symptoms, e.g., a fever, indicate that they may have COVID-19. For additional guidance, see Air Carrier Access Act, part 382.19 and part 382.21 which address medical clearance for persons with disabilities and passengers with communicable diseases : <https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?node=pt14.4.382&rgn=div5>



- New bilateral SSRs have been adopted for the collection and exchange of information regarding additional documentation checks and mask exemptions
- Where airlines wish to identify passengers that have been cleared to travel (e.g. where additional documentation such as a valid test have been checked), new standards have been developed to allow airlines to capture this information and communicate this with third party ground handlers or internal airport teams. This standard is a new bilateral Special Service Request (SSR) ADOC (Additional Documentation) which may be included within a passenger name record (PNR) at check-in, to be exchanged with ground handlers using existing industry standards, to be visible at time of boarding.
- Where airlines wish to identify passengers that have a valid exemption from wearing a face mask (such as a medical condition or a disability that prevents them to wear a face mask), a new standard has also been developed to allow airlines to capture this information and communicate this with third party ground handlers, cabin-crew, partner carriers or internal airport teams. This standard is a new bilateral Special Service Request (SSR) NMOK (No Mask OK) which may be included within a passenger name records (PNR) at check-in, to be exchanged with ground handlers using existing industry standards, to be visible at time of boarding.
- Both SSRs have been developed and adopted by IATA member airlines and will take effect from 1 June 2021 (subject to government filing).
- Regulation is changing rapidly. For up to date information on current requirements, member airlines should refer to the IATA Travel Centre at [travelcentre.iata.org](https://www.travelcentre.iata.org)