

BROADCAST-To Travel or Not To Travel: What to Consider

Editor's note: This story has been updated 8/18/2020 to include a new travel map from the Illinois Department of Public Health to show states and countries that have a higher risk for travel because of COVID-19 case rates).

Many airlines are offering reduced fares and travel companies are offering trips to exotic locales such as Bali or Belize with packages that allow you to book now at a bargain rate and plan to travel a year to 18 months from now. But, is it worth the investment and what are the risks of even a day trip or road trip to visit a national park?

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says [any travel carries risk](#) and the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 is to stay home.

[This travel map](#) from the Illinois Department of Public Health is designed to inform residents where they might be at greater risk of being exposed to COVID-19 when they travel.

If you decide to travel, the standard precautions apply: Wear a mask to keep your nose and mouth covered when in public settings. Avoid close contact by staying at least 6 feet (about 2 arms' length) from anyone who is not from your household.

You should also know the travel and quarantine restrictions where you're going and be willing to call off the trip if COVID-related conditions change.

OSF HealthCare Infection Prevention and Control Director Lori Grooms suggests looking at the positivity rate in the areas you plan to visit because it shows the prevalence of the virus.

SOT-Lori Grooms, director of Infection Prevention & Control, OSF HealthCare

“Most places we look at having a positivity rate of below 8% but you also want to look at what several counties and regions in Illinois are now showing that positivity rate and how it's changing over time.” (:13)

Grooms says avoid travel if the positivity rate has been going up over the past seven days. It's also important to know the daily rate of new cases in the area of your final destination.

SOT-Lori Grooms, director of Infection Prevention & Control, OSF HealthCare

“Watch and see whether their rate of new cases is going up, is it coming down, is it flat? And, what is their hospitalization rate because that can tell you about the severity of cases in their area.” (:11)

Your risk is higher if the rate of new cases per day is exceeding 15 per 100,000.

The CDC highlights the importance of considering whether you or someone you live with is [at a higher risk for contracting the novel coronavirus](#).

Traveling by a vehicle is a lower risk than flying or using public transportation, but it still carries some risk.

Consider who you are traveling with, who you'll be visiting, and whether you are comfortable with their level of exposure to the virus. Longer trips will require stopping for food, bathroom breaks, and gas, which Grooms points out provides opportunity for exposure.

SOT-Lori Grooms, director of Infection Prevention & Control, OSF HealthCare

“You may come into contact with anyone from anywhere within the United States, so even looking at the rate within that specific area may not be that pertinent when you're talking about travel requiring a gas station.” (:13)

On your road trip, Grooms says plan to eat as many meals as possible on your own -- at a sparsely populated picnic or rest area and bring sanitizer and wipes for use when needed.

Travel Deals

There are some companies offering deluxe accommodations at top resorts for as low as half the usual rate.

Does it make sense to take advantage of the great deals right now? Grooms says make sure to read the fine print on any bargain before booking.

SOT-Lori Grooms, director of Infection Prevention & Control, OSF HealthCare

“Because you want to make sure it comes with the flexibility to alter dates; what happens if you need to cancel your dates or change them after you've made them? You also want to consider historically other pandemics have lasted for anywhere from a year to 2 years and will we at the same time in 2021 be in the same situation? We really don't know.” (:24)

Many providers of trip insurance have warnings posted on their websites that their travel protection plans generally do not cover losses related to COVID-19.

When flying, you can bring a larger amount of hand sanitizer in your carry-on and most airlines are requesting passengers wear masks at all times. With that, Grooms says it might be best to practice keeping your mask on for extended periods if you plan to fly.

“Wear your mask for errands. Increase the amount of time you’re wearing it. Maybe go for walks and wear your mask just so you build up your tolerance because it does take time to adjust to wearing a mask.”

Testing

Some government-run testing sites have been seeing increasing numbers in the past couple of weeks and some public health department directors attribute some of those increases to people getting testing before traveling and after they return. But Grooms says those tests are really only a snapshot in time and really reflect their status the day they were tested. Test results can take 3 to 4 days to come back so by the time you get your result, you might have acquired the virus from some other exposure.

For more information about travel risks, consult [the latest recommendations from the CDC](#).