

BROADCAST-Study Finds Flying Safer Than You Might Expect

You should feel better about traveling by air with the results of a recent [Department of Defense](#) (DOD) study.

According to results, the risk of catching the virus that causes COVID-19 through the air on a crowded airplane from an infected passenger who is wearing a mask is very low and “virtually non-existent” if *you* wear a mask.

Jolene Bowen, an infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare, says the study used mannequins that don't represent the way most people behave. However, Bowen says the DOD study was rigorous and backs up what airlines have been saying; airplanes are well-ventilated spaces.

SOT-Jolene Bowen, Infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare

“The air that comes in enters at the ceiling and enters at the floor so that if you're a passenger and you're doing normal breathing, the air currents carry it down and all the air is sent through a HEPA filter.” (:19)

Bowen says the highly efficient filters can eliminate 99% of virus particles. She also said high frequency air circulation systems helped dilute tracer particles on the large planes.

SOT-Jolene Bowen, Infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare

“There are about 20 to 30 air changes per hour; kind of similar to in a hospital or in an operating room where you have 12 to 15 air changes per hour - that's why it feels almost breezy sometimes or it feels chilly because of the air current. That part (air circulation and filtration) provides a lot more safety than other forms of transportation.” (:26)

All airlines now require face masks on board. To promote physical distancing, many are doing back-to-front boarding to minimize crowding in the aisles, imposing capacity limits, and some are blocking middle seats on wide body planes. But, during the busy holiday season, it might be impossible to avoid sitting next to someone whose history of exposure is unknown.

SOT-Jolene Bowen, Infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare

“So in particular, when you're eating your meal, whether it's food you brought from the outside or your morning coffee or your water, be mindful if your neighbor in their seat has their mask off and they're exposed and they're eating or drinking. Then that's not a good time for you to be doing that.” (:22)

Bowen says you can minimize risk by consider taking an overnight or mid-day flight which are generally less popular.

SOT-Jolene Bowen, Infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare

“You can try to pick off-peak hours. That'll reduce your exposure at the airport as well as when you're landing and when you're actually in the plane.” (:12)

Of course not traveling offers the best protection against contracting the novel coronavirus from someone else. But Bowen says people have to balance the risk with their need to, for instance, see an aging loved one. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and public health agencies recommend that as part of your risk assessment, evaluate the COVID-19 positivity rate for your final destination using any one of the available [travel tracking maps](#).

Traveling by car under 500 miles offers the lowest risk. The risk increases beyond 500 miles because of required stops. But, even with that, Bowen suggests maybe scheduling a more unconventional day for your holiday celebration.

SOT-Jolene Bowen, Infection preventionist for OSF HealthCare

“Maybe it would be easier if you had Thanksgiving on a Sunday or maybe on Wednesday so that even if you’re driving, you’re not on the road at the same time as a lot of other travelers. That’ll decrease your exposure if you’re going to the gas station to pump gas or if you’re going in and getting a snack or using the restroom or even going to a rest area.” (:24)

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Finally, while you’re packing, make sure you have what Bowen calls a “self-sanitation kit” that includes a package of antibacterial wipes, hand sanitizer and an extra mask in a zip lock bag. The zip lock will prevent cross contamination once you’re ready to change masks.

The [CDC](#) has more holiday travel recommendations.