PRINT-Study Finds Flying Safer Than You Might Expect

Travel writer Mark Gauert recently wrote, “It’ll be awhile before we travel the way we used to again; back when people wanted to know where we’d been, what we’d seen and what we’d done – not the precautions we took when we were there.”

Gauert’s frustrations are understandable but precautions during travel, particularly by air and train this holiday season can lower the risk of spreading the virus that causes COVID-19.

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 aboard a crowded commercial 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; that airplanes are well-ventilated spaces.

“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,” she explained.

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 Boeing planes used for the study.

“There are about 20 to 30 air changes per hour; kind of similar to in a hospital or in an operating room even 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,” Bowen said.

She concluded, “That part (air circulation and filtration) provides a lot more safety than other forms of transportation.”

All airlines now require masks on board. To promote physical distancing, many are doing back-to-front boarding to minimize crowding in the isles, 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.

Bowen says in that case, it’s important to avoid moving through the aircraft during the flight and she encourages paying attention to what your seatmate is doing. Most airlines have suspended in-flight meals and drink service but that won’t stop some passengers from eating what they carry on.

“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,” she advised.

Some of the greatest risk comes *before* the air traveler gets to the airport so Bowen suggests driving your own car and avoiding shuttles and public transportation if possible. She says within the airport, remember two arms’ length represents the 6-foot distance you should keep from others. And, Bowen says you can minimize risk by consider taking an overnight or mid-day flight which are generally less popular.

“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,” according to Bowen.

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.

If you do travel to areas of higher risk, stay home if possible after returning and monitor your health for 14 days to protect yourself and others. Your travel cost-benefit analysis should also take into account your underlying health conditions and those of others who will be part of your visit.

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.

“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.”

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.