

PRINT-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. But, if you're thinking about trying to sneak in a last-minute summer get-away, or are considering taking advantage of future travel specials later, it's important to make an informed decision, so be prepared to do some research and to follow stringent practices.

[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. Many states and cities such as Chicago, or even individual counties have travel restrictions, including testing and/or quarantine requirements. Check any number of well-established travel website to get the latest information.

OSF HealthCare Infection Prevention and Control Director Lori Grooms suggests another resource is [a new dashboard from Harvard Global Health](#) to help assess your risk before travel. It shows the prevalence of new cases by state and county – so you can assess your risk of exposure to someone who may have COVID-19.

She advises looking at the positivity rate in the areas you plan to visit during your trip. That rate shows the prevalence because it's a measure of the positive cases out of all those tested.

"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."

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 and to watch the trend.

"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," according to Grooms.

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. If taking a rental car, make sure to wipe down all high-touch surfaces.

More hotels across the country are welcoming guests and big names in the business have put in place increased safety protocols, including cleaning checklists and guarantees, but it's a good idea to bring some disinfectant wipes and do your own touch-ups. The CDC advises using remote check-in at hotels and contactless payment methods.

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.

"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."

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 the CDC has a no-sail order for cruises in effect until September 30 and the agency recommends against all international travel, so make sure to read the fine print on any bargain before booking

"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."

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](#).