

News

Airlines Tighten Mask Restrictions, Partner With Covid-19 Testing Providers

Delta, United and Alaska Airlines have banned more than 900 passengers for not wearing masks. Here's a roundup of the requirements and protocols to expect from each airline.



by [Elise Schoening](#)



by [Lisa A. Grimaldi](#)

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Delta requires all customers and employees to wear a face mask that covers their mouth and nose. Face shields and masks with an exhaust valve are not accepted. Photo Credit:Delta Air Lines

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Updated Nov. 13, 2020.

Flying is likely safer than going to the grocery store or eating out, according to [new research](#) from [Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health](#). The report credits airlines safety measures, including air ventilation, face masks, disinfection and health screenings, with reduced risk of Covid-19 transmission. (The study, though conducted independently, was sponsored by a consortium of aviation industry airline operators, manufacturers and airport operators.)

"This layered approach, with ventilation gate-to-gate, reduces the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission onboard aircraft below that of other routine activities during the pandemic, such as grocery shopping or eating out," says the report.

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While international air travel isn't expected to recover from the coronavirus pandemic until 2024, according to the [International Air Transport Association](#), airlines are hoping that enhanced health and safety protocols will help assuage traveler fears and get more customers back in the sky sooner rather than later.

Among the latest efforts, airlines are tightening their mask restrictions. Many carriers have revamped their mask policy and no longer allow face coverings with exhaust valves or openings. Bandanas, scarves and face shields also are not accepted. According to the [Washington Post](#), [Delta](#), [United](#) and [Alaska Airlines](#) have banned more than 900 passengers for refusing to wear a mask.

In addition, some airlines are now partnering with Covid-19 testing providers to offer customers access to rapid-response testing. [Jet Blue](#), for example, has teamed up with [Vault Health](#) to offer at-home Covid-19 tests, with results in 72 hours or less. Following are details on the safety protocols from many carriers.

Air Canada

[Air Canada](#) become the first airline in the Americas to introduce temperature checks back in May. The move was part of the company's new Air Canada CleanCare+ program.

All Air Canada customers must complete a health questionnaire and infrared temperature check before traveling. Anyone deemed unfit to fly will be rebooked on another flight at no cost, but will need to obtain medical clearance before they can travel. Beginning Dec. 15, travelers will also need to present a negative Covid-19 test at check-in and/or prior to boarding. The test must taken within 72 hours before departure. A second test will be required for the return flight if the departure time exceeds 72 hours from when the first test was taken.

The airline requires all employees and customers over the age of 2 to wear face masks. Details on acceptable masks can be found [here](#) (bandanas, scarves and masks with an exhalation valve do not qualify). Additional personal protective equipment, such as gloves, are available to staff members but are not required. Disposable customer-care kits, which include complimentary hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes, are distributed to all passengers.

High-touch areas at check-in and at the gates are disinfected frequently. A hospital-grade disinfectant is used to sanitize planes before every flight. Thorough cleanings are conducted nightly and electrostatic sprayers are used to ensure the highest hygiene standards.

Alaska Airlines

[Alaska Airlines](#) has rolled out the Next-Level Care program to ensure traveler safety. Since June 30, travelers have been required to complete a health agreement as part of the check-in process. The agreement asks passengers to confirm they have not

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exhibited Covid-19 symptoms within the past 72 hours, have not been in close proximity to someone who has tested positive, and will wear a face mask in the airport and aboard the aircraft.

The airline is partnering with testing providers to help guests travel to destinations that require a negative Covid-19 result. Testing is available by appointment in-person, at-home or via drive-through. More details [here](#).

Employees and all guests over the age of 2 are required to wear masks, which are available for customers who fail to bring their own. Travelers who repeatedly refuse to wear a mask will receive a warning and might be suspended from flying with Alaska Airlines for a period of time.

The carrier also is limiting the number of guests on its flights and blocking middle seats through Jan. 6, 2021, with some exceptions for seating families together and for accommodating guests on previously cancelled flights. Food-and-beverage services onboard have been reduced to limit interactions between customers and staff. Guests are encouraged to bring their own food and water.

Alaska Airlines has developed enhanced aircraft-cleaning procedures in coordination with infectious-disease experts from the University of Washington. This includes cleaning planes with electrostatic disinfectant sprayers and bringing in a dedicated cleaning crew between flights. Once complete, the crew head conducts an audit of the procedures, before signing a cleaning certificate.

Hand-sanitizing stations are being added to check-in lobbies and gate areas, which are sanitized on a frequent basis. "Mind Your Wingspan" floor decals and signage have been added to encourage physical distancing between travelers.

The airline has now reopened its Alaska Lounges in Anchorage; Los Angeles; Seattle; and Portland, Ore. Limited capacities, enhanced cleanings and adjusted food-and-beverage services have been implemented.

American Airlines

[American Airlines](#) requires all employees and travelers over the age of 2 to wear a face mask while flying and in the airport. Masks must cover the mouth and nose. Face coverings that have exhaust valves or vents, or are made with mesh or lace fabric will not be allowed. Face shields can be worn in addition to a mask, but not in place of one.

Limited quantities of face masks will be available for travelers who do not bring their own. Travelers who do not wear a mask will be denied boarding and future travel with the airline.

High-touch customer and team-member areas are cleaned before every flight. Public areas of the aircraft are disinfected with [electrostatic spraying](#). In addition, every aircraft is thoroughly cleaned with EPA-approved disinfectants on a weekly basis.

According to American, the cabin air in all planes is changed every two to four minutes, on par with hospital standards. Most airlines are also outfitted with [High-Efficiency Particulate Air \(HEPA\) filters](#) that remove airborne particulates while in flight. Cleaning of gate areas, ticket counters, passenger-service counters, baggage-service offices and team-member rooms has been increased. Physical-distancing signs have been posted at gates and ticket counters. In-flight food-and-beverage services have been adjusted based on the flight length and destination.

The airline has [reopened some lounges](#), including in Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago and Orlando. The clubs are cleaned on a frequent basis and hand-sanitizing stations have been installed. Signage and QR codes allow for touchless menus. Modified food-and-beverage service includes packaged snacks and complimentary hot food, as well as drinks served in disposable glassware. Self-serve areas remain closed.

American Airlines is seeking to become [GBAC Star certified](#) in coronavirus cleaning and prevention. The carrier expects to complete the accreditation program by the end of 2020.

Delta Air Lines

[Delta](#) has announced a new partnership with Lysol-maker [Reckitt Benckiser](#) to enhance its Delta CareStandard protocols launched during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lysol products will be used to disinfect hotspots, such as check-in and baggage-claim areas. The companies also are working together to identify best practices in disinfecting protocols and to address ongoing travel cleanliness concerns. In addition, Delta has created a new Global Cleanliness division to drive a long-term commitment to enhanced hygiene practices.

"There's no finish line for cleanliness — there's always more we can do to innovate and elevate our already high standards, because that's what our customers and employees expect and deserve," said [Bill Lentsch](#), Delta's chief customer experience officer. "The experts at Lysol share our drive for innovative, continuous improvement — they're the best at their craft. That's why we're excited to get started on R&D to target germ 'hotspots' and cement the Delta CareStandard as the industry gold standard — so customers feel confident in choosing Delta as more people return to travel."

The airline requires all Delta customers and employees to wear face masks. They must be worn onboard the aircraft, as well as at lobby check-in, in Delta Sky Clubs and in boarding areas. As of Nov. 12, the airline has [banned 550 passengers](#) for refusing to wear masks. In late July, Delta introduced a Covid-19 health assessment to its check-in process.

The carrier will continue to block middle or adjacent seats in all cabins through Jan. 6, 2021 (exceptions will be made for parties of three or more who are traveling together). Boarding will begin from the rear of the aircraft in order to limit crowding. Food-and-

beverage options have been pared down to reduce touchpoints between staff and customers.

Additional cleanliness protocols include fogging plane interiors with a high-grade EPA-registered disinfectant before every flight. An extensive checklist is being used during aircraft cleaning, focusing on high-touch areas. Before each flight, a customer service agent and a flight leader will conduct a spot check to make sure the aircraft meets Delta standards. If not, a cleaning crew will be asked to return for additional sanitization.

Emirates

Dubai-based [Emirates](#), which operated 3,600 flights a week before the pandemic, was the first airline to offer free Covid-19 insurance if travelers get sick. This includes coverage for medical treatment and health expenses (up to US\$175,000) and quarantine costs (up to US\$115 per day for 14 days). The offer is valid for all travel through Dec. 31, at no charge to customers.

All cabin crew, boarding agents and ground staff in direct contact with passengers must don personal protective equipment, including disposable gowns, safety visors, masks and gloves.

On flights, passengers over the age of six are required to wear their masks throughout their journey from check-in until they disembark. A complimentary travel hygiene kit with gloves, a face mask, antibacterial wipes and hand sanitizer will be provided for them at check-in.

Other protocols include the removal of magazines and other print material. Meals are now limited to bento-style boxes, to reduce contact between the crew and passengers. All Emirates planes now undergo enhanced cleaning and disinfection processes after each journey. Lavatories are frequently disinfected, and if a flight is longer than 90 minutes, an extra crew member dedicated to cleaning the lavatories will be added.

The carrier has opened its Business Class Lounge on Concourse B at Dubai International Airport. The number of people allowed into the lounge has been reduced and all tables and seating have been spaced six feet apart. QR codes allow customers to order from a contactless menu. Sanitation has also been increased, with washrooms and recliner seats cleaned after each use. Other high-touch areas are disinfected frequently.

Frontier Airlines

[Frontier Airlines](#) began implementing temperature checks for all passengers and staff members in June.

Anyone with a temperature of 100.4 degrees or higher will be denied boarding. If the departure time allows, customers can rest for a little and then get their temperatures rechecked. If the reading is still too high, they will be rebooked on another flight for a later date.

In addition, all travelers are required to wear face coverings and will need to complete a health acknowledgement form to certify that:

- Neither they nor anyone in their household has come into close contact with, tested positive for, exhibited symptoms of or been advised to quarantine for Covid-19 in the past 14 days.
- They will have their temperatures checked with a touchless thermometer prior to boarding.
- They will wear a face covering over their noses and mouths throughout their journey, including at ticket counters, in gate areas and aboard the flight.
- They will wash their hands before boarding.

According to Frontier, all planes are equipped with HEPA filters and the cabin air is replaced every three minutes. Aircraft are cleaned before every flight, with a focus on passenger seating, cabin walls, overhead bins, galleys and lavatories. Additional cleaning is conducted for planes with extended time between flights. A top-to-bottom sanitization is done every night. Enhanced deep cleanings are conducted monthly, using an antimicrobial agent that is designed to form a protective shield against viruses for 30 days.

Hawaiian Airlines

Out-of-state travelers to Hawaii can avoid a mandatory 14-day quarantine by getting a valid Covid-19 test within 72 hours before the final leg of departure and showing proof of a negative test result. [Hawaiian Airlines](#) has partnered with [testing facilities](#) to help passengers get tested in person or at home. The airline's testing partners guarantee results within the required 72-hour time frame.

Hawaiian Airlines currently requires all guests to wear face masks that cover their mouth and nose, from check-in at the airport to deplaning at the destination. Young children under the age of two and guests with medical conditions that prevent them from wearing masks are exempt. Airport employees and flight attendants are also required to wear masks.

The airline is also modifying its boarding process. Guests will be asked to remain seated at the gate until their row is called, and boarding will begin from the rear of the aircraft in groups of three to five rows at a time. Gate agents can pause boarding as needed to prevent crowding.

Sanitizing wipes will be distributed to passengers. Meanwhile, detailed cleaning and disinfecting protocols have been added between flights and the airline has begun applying an electrostatic treatment at least once a day to its planes.

The airline's lounges have been closed and in-flight services, such as alcohol and hot-

towel services, have been suspended. Hawaiian Airlines airport employees have been trained to identify and assist people with Covid-19 symptoms while minimizing the risk of contagion.

JetBlue Airways

[JetBlue](#) has implemented temperature screenings for all customer-facing crew members. The airline has also partnered with [Vault Health](#) to provide customers with access to [at-home Covid-19 testing](#). Results for the saliva-based tests are expected in 72 hours or less.

Travelers are required to wear face coverings during check-in, boarding and in-flight. Crew members must also wear masks, along with medical-grade gloves, during service delivery.

As part of the check-in process, passengers must complete a health declaration that they have not tested positive for Covid-19, experienced any symptoms nor been in contact with anyone who has tested positive. Customers will be given Personal Protection Packs prior to boarding, which include hand sanitizer and two disinfectant wipes.

Normal boarding procedures have been halted. Instead, most customers will board the plane from the back to the front. The carrier is no longer blocking middle seats, but plans to continue to limit capacities on most flights through Jan. 7, 2021.

The sale of onboard products, such as beer, wine and EatUp boxes, has been suspended temporarily. The Pantry, JetBlue's communal grab-and-go snack-and-beverage area, will no longer be available. Food-and-beverage offerings, however, will be served as part of the airline's premium travel experience, [JetBlue Mint](#).

All JetBlue aircraft are equipped with hospital-grade HEPA filters, and the cabin air is changed roughly every three minutes. Tray tables and lavatories are disinfected before every flight. Deep cleanings are conducted each night, using electrostatic sprayers.

Southwest Airlines

[Southwest Airlines](#) unveiled health measures in May. The initiative, titled "Southwest Promise," aims to assure customers that safety has and always will be the airline's top priority.

The cleanliness standards apply to the airport areas as well as the planes. Southwest spaces at airports, including ticket counters, gates and baggage claim, will be cleaned multiple times a day. In addition, Plexiglas shields have been installed at ticket counters and gate podiums, and airport signage and floor markers are used to encourage physical distancing in the gate areas.

In mid-April, Southwest began using electrostatic sprayers to apply disinfectants and an antimicrobial protectant to every interior surface of an aircraft. The sprays are designed to kill viruses and create a protective shield for 30 days. Each plane is also being cleaned for nearly six to seven hours each night. Particular attention is being paid to high-touch areas, including every tray table, armrest, seatbelt, window, air vent and button. Additional cleanings between flights have been added, and HEPA filters are used to circulate air and remove airborne particles in the cabin of every flight.

Water and a snack mix are being served on flights of more than 250 miles, when available. All other beverage and snack service has been suspended for the time being. Southwest will [stop blocking middle seats](#) on Dec. 1.

Employees and customers are required to wear face masks at all times. The airline has extra face masks and sanitizing wipes on hand if customers forget to bring their own.

Spirit Airlines

All [Spirit](#) guests and staff members must wear face coverings. Only children under the age of 2 are exempt. For guests who do not bring their own mask, the discount airline will provide one for \$3.

The Spirit mobile app offers contactless check-in, and self-bag-tagging is available at most airports. Electrostatic cleaning devices have been deployed to disinfect Spirit ticket counters, gates, break rooms, maintenance centers and crew bases in high-traffic airports.

Spirit has also expanded its aircraft-cleaning protocols with a focus on highly frequented areas, including tray tables, handles and arm rests. All Spirit planes come equipped with HEPA filters, and crew members have been trained to report and address infectious diseases.

United Airlines

[United](#) has put together a [coronavirus safety hub](#) with the latest updates on what the carrier is doing to keep customers and employees safe. The standards, dubbed United CleanPlus, were developed in partnership with the [Cleveland Clinic](#) and [Clorox](#).

Changes include temperature checks for all employees and flight attendants, installing sneeze guards at check-in and gate podiums, and offering contactless check-in through the United app. High-touch areas on planes, such as armrests and door handles, will be disinfected with a range of Clorox products throughout the day. The carrier is also using electrostatic-disinfectant sprayers on all planes before departure.

All United crew members and customers are required to wear face masks at the airport and in-flight. Guests who do not have their own masks will be provided with one.

Anyone who refuses to wear a mask might be denied boarding and could lose their travel privileges on future United flights. Customers must also acknowledge that they do not have any Covid-19 symptoms during the check-in process.

To minimize contact between crew and customers in flight, United is switching to an "all-in-one" snack bag that has sanitizer wipes, an 8.5-ounce water bottle, a stroopwafel and a package of pretzels.

Physical-distancing measures have been implemented at the airport, including signage and six-foot markers at ticket booths. Fewer customers board at a time, with boarding beginning from the back rows.

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