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News

The Latest on Airline Safety Protocols

Covid-19 testing and mobile apps that allow customers to view travel requirements and upload test results or vaccination records are among the latest offerings from carriers.

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United offers a variety of testing options, as well as a clearance program for passengers traveling to Hawaii. Photo Credit:United Airlines

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Passenger air traffic fell 60 percent in 2020, with airline losses topping $370 billion according to a new report from the International Civil Aviation Organization. In an effort to get travelers back in the sky sooner rather than later, carriers are enhancing their safety protocols and partnering with testing providers to make travel as safe and seamless as possible.

As of Jan. 26, all passengers arriving in the United States from a foreign country must show proof of a negative Covid-19 test result or documentation of having recovered from the virus, before boarding. The test must be taken within three days prior to departure. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also recommends that travelers get tested three to five days after travel and self quarantine for seven days, even if their test result is negative.

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To make the travel process easier, American Airlines and United have rolled out new mobile apps that allow travelers to view Covid-19 requirements in their destination and directly upload their test results or vaccination records.

Airlines also are partnering with Covid-19 testing providers to provide customers with access to rapid-response testing. United, for example, offers on-site testing at select destinations, as well as mail-in testing options for anyone traveling from the U.S. mainland or Alaska to Hawaii. Meanwhile, JetBlue has teamed up with Vault Health to offer at-home Covid-19 tests, with results in 72 hours or less. American Airlines also offers at-home testing, as well as in-person and on-site options at select destinations.

Following are details on the latest safety protocols at major airlines.

Air Canada

As of Jan. 7, passengers entering Canada must have proof of a negative coronavirus PCR test taken within 72 hours of travel. Air Canada, the first airline in the Americas to introduce temperature checks back in May, already had such a requirement in place, which began on Dec. 15. A second test for the carrier's passengers is required for the return flight if the departure time exceeds 72 hours from when the first test was taken. Testing details can be found here.

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.

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

As of Jan. 7, Alaska Airlines is no longer blocking middle seats. The carrier is, however, 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. Find more details here.

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As part of the airline's Next-Level Care program, all travelers are required to complete a health agreement during the check-in process. The agreement asks passengers to confirm they have not 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 while in the airport and aboard the aircraft.

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. Food-and-beverage services on board 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. Planes are cleaned with electrostatic disinfectant sprayers and dedicated cleaning crews are brought in 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 has partnered with health providers LetsGetChecked and CareNow to offer at-home, in-person and on-site rapid-testing options for select destinations (see details here). The airline has also released a new mobile app, which allows passengers to review travel requirements and restrictions for their destinations. Users can upload required documents, such as negative Covid-19 tests results, directly to the VeriFly app.

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 will be barred from future travel with the airline.

American is the first airline to achieve GBAC Star accreditation for the coronavirus cleaning and prevention efforts implemented on its fleet of aircraft and in its customer lounges. All 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 planes 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 those 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.

Delta Air Lines

In the latest news, Delta has hired Dr. Henry Ting, a Mayo Clinic executive, as its first chief health officer. The airline has partnered with the Mayo and Lysol-maker Reckitt Benckiser since the beginning of the pandemic, in an effort to continually enhance its Delta CareStandard protocols. In addition, Delta has created a Global Cleanliness division to drive a long-term commitment to enhanced hygiene practices.

"Caring for our people is a core responsibility that flows from our values," said Delta CEO Ed Bastian. "In this new role, Henry will lead us in rethinking and reimagining our approach to health and well-being, utilizing new technologies, artificial intelligence, data strategies and innovative partnerships."

On Dec. 15, Delta launched "Covid-tested" flights from Atlanta to Amsterdam. All passenger must take a PCR test five days before travel, followed by a rapid antigen test before boarding at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Both tests must be negative in order for travelers to board the flight, and a second PCR test must be taken upon arrival at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. If the final test is negative, passengers will not need to quarantine. On Dec. 19, "Covid-tested" flights also began for travelers flying to Rome from Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, as well as John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey. Passengers must take a PCR test 72 hours before departure and a rapid Covid-19 test at the airport. Another rapid test must be taken upon arrival in Rome, along with a final rapid test before traveling back to the United States.

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. Since May, the airline has banned more than 800 passengers for refusing to wear masks. Passengers are also required to complete a Covid-19 health assessment as part of the check-in process.

The carrier will continue to block middle or adjacent seats in all cabins through March 30 (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 touch points 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. Lysol products are used to disinfect hotspots, such as check-in and baggage-claim areas at airports.

Emirates

Dubai-based Emirates, which operated 3,600 flights a week before the pandemic, is 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$500,000) and quarantine costs (up to US$115 per day for 14 days). The offer is valid for all flights through March 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 6 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 at check-in.

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 seats 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 10-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. The island of Kauai, however, has paused its participation in the pretravel testing program and all visitors must quarantine for two weeks unless they meet the requirements for the Kauai interisland travel and resort bubble exemptions (details here).

Hawaiian Airlines also has launched a pre-clear program, which allows travelers with a negative Covid-19 test result to bypass airport screening in Hawaii. The program, available for those departing from San Francisco International Airport, will be expanded to Phoenix International Airport on Jan. 29, New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport and California's Long Beach Airport on Jan. 30, and Boston Logan International Airport on Jan. 31. The program is expected to be rolled out at the airline's remaining North American destinations in February.

In addition, 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.

All passengers must wear face masks that cover their mouths and noses, from check-in at the airport to deplaning at the destination. Young children under the age of 2 and guests with medical conditions that prevent them from wearing masks are exempt. Airport employees and flight attendants are also required to wear masks.

Hawaiian has modified its boarding process, asking guests to remain seated at the gate until their rows are 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 sanitizing its planes with an electrostatic sprayer at least once a day.

In-flight services, such as alcohol and hot-towel services, have been suspended. The Kauai and Hawaii Island Premier Club lounges remain closed. Lounges at Honolulu's Daniel K. Inouye International Airport and the Kahului Airport in Maui have reopened, using social-distancing measures, face-mask mandates and frequent disinfection. 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 passengers with access to at-home Covid-19 testing. Results for the saliva-based tests are expected in 72 hours or less. As of Jan. 8, the carrier is no longer blocking middle seats or limiting flight capacities.

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 stating 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.

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 stopped 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 passengers 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 launched an online travel-ready center, where customers can review Covid-19 entry requirements, find local testing options and upload any necessary documents, such as coronavirus test results and vaccination records. The new solution is accessible via United's mobile app and website. The carrier plans to add more features

to the travel-ready center in the coming weeks, including the ability to schedule a Covid-19 test at one of more than 15,000 testing sites around the world. Also expected is information on visa requirements and the option to video chat with a customer service agent who can answer any questions about pre-travel requirements.

For travelers visiting Hawaii, United has added a clearance program that allows customers to skip document-screening lines on the islands by showing proof of a negative Covid-19 test result before boarding. Hawaii currently requires all out-of-state travelers to present a negative test taken within 72 hours before the final leg of departure to avoid the state's mandatory 10-day quarantine. The island of Kauai has stricter requirements and only allows interisland travelers and those staying in resort bubbles to avoid quarantining if they meet certain criteria and test negative.

"We're making it easier for customers traveling to Hawaii to spend more time enjoying their trip and less time waiting in lines," said Toby Enqvist, chief customer officer at United. "Testing is the key to opening domestic and international travel so we'll continue to lead the way in rolling out solutions that are simple and safe, so our customers have what they need when they take their next trip with us."

The carrier has teamed up with a number health-care providers to offer a range of Covid-19 testing options. Customers traveling to Hawaii from Denver, San Francisco, New York, and Newark, N.J., can complete a coronavirus test from XpresCheck at the airport. Meanwhile, ADL Health provides mail-in testing options for anyone traveling from the U.S. mainland or Alaska to Hawaii. Additional testing options are available for those traveling to the U.S. from abroad (details here).

United is also working with the CDC to collect customer contact information for all international and domestic flights. During the check-in process, United passengers will be prompted to opt in voluntarily and provide contact information such as an email address, phone number and an address of where they will be once they reach their destinations — details that have been difficult for the CDC to obtain in real time. Customers can opt in and participate using United's mobile app, at united.com or at the airport.

The carrier has put together a coronavirus safety hub with the latest updates on what it 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 passengers 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.

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

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