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Covid-19: Air travellers should not be considered high risk, says European guidance

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Air travellers should not be systematically tested for SARS-CoV-2 or asked to quarantine on their return home from Europe because they are generally at low risk of having the virus, says guidance from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).¹ Only people who have had known contact with someone with covid-19 should be required to quarantine.

The report, published jointly with the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, says that because SARS-CoV-2 is present in most European countries, imported cases are unlikely to significantly increase the rate of transmission. In the week beginning 2 November, “imported cases accounted for less than 1% of the total number of cases, with the vast majority of cases being locally acquired,” it said.

Travel measures introduced by European countries have varied significantly during the pandemic and have resulted in significant confusion for travellers. National criteria have been used to determine the potential need for testing or voluntary or mandatory quarantine of incoming travellers and have changed on average every one to two weeks because of the rapidly evolving situation.

The UK, for example, has removed the requirement for all inbound travellers to self-isolate for 14 days when coming from some countries, but has since re-imposed it in several cases.

In contrast, many high income countries in the Asia Pacific region have introduced strict border control measures for travellers, including mandatory testing, quarantine, health declarations, and thermal imaging.²

The ECDC recommended a harmonised approach among member states, but it notes that the advice may need updating if testing technologies or vaccines change risk assessment criteria.

UK exemptions

On 3 December the UK’s transport secretary Grant Shapps announced that “high value business travellers” would be exempt from quarantine rules in an effort to boost the economy, “subject to specific criteria being met.”

From 4 am on 5 December “individuals undertaking specific business activity which would deliver a significant benefit to the UK economy—including activity that creates or preserves 50+ UK jobs—will no longer need to self-isolate when travelling or returning from non-exempt countries,” says guidance from the Department of Transport.³ Exemptions will also apply to domestic and international performing arts professionals, TV production staff, journalists, and recently signed elite sports players.

The Department for Transport did not respond to a request for comment on the guidance from the ECDC.

1 European Union Aviation Safety Agency. Guidelines for covid-19 testing and quarantine of air travellers: addendum to the Aviation Health Safety Protocol. December 2020. www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Guidelines_for_COVID-19_testing_and_quarantine_of_air_travellers-12-2020.pdf.

2 Han E, Tan MMJ, Turk E, et al. Lessons learnt from easing COVID-19 restrictions: an analysis of countries and regions in Asia Pacific and Europe. *Lancet* 2020;396:1525-34. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32007-9 pmid: 32979936

3 Department of Transport. Travel corridor update, 3 December 2020. December 2020. www.gov.uk/government/news/travel-corridor-update-3-december-2020.