

Harvard Says Flying Is Safer Than Visiting The Grocery Store

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Findings from a Harvard University research project have confirmed what airline bosses have long argued – flying is safe from a COVID-19 perspective. Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health has just released its findings concerning the risk of COVID-19 transmission while in the air. The research paper concluded the risk of catching COVID-19 in-flight is very low.

A recent Harvard University paper says from a COVID-19 perspective, flying is safer than many day to day activities, including grocery shopping. Photo: Seattle Airport Newsroom It's not quite a free pass. Harvard's School of Public Health says you have to mitigate and manage the risks. Airlines and passengers can do this by adopting a layered approach. This includes everyone wearing face masks, properly cleaning planes, people practising social distancing protocols, and effective health screening procedures. With these in place, the research paper says *"The risk of SARS-COVID-19 transmission onboard aircraft (reduces) below that of other routine activities during the pandemic, such as grocery shopping or eating out."*

The Harvard paper proposes a "gate to gate" solution to managing the risk of COVID-19. Airlines need to focus on three things – ventilation, cleaning, and managing social distancing.

Modern HEPA filters mitigate risk by rapid and continuous filtering and exchange of cabin air in aircraft. These filters, standard across modern jet aircraft, extract more than 99.99% of particles, including viruses. They can completely recirculate cabin air 10 to 30 times per hour with fresh air.

With new findings emerging about the ability of viruses like COVID-19 to survive for extended periods on hard surfaces like plastics, the cleaning of touchpoints on planes becomes more and more important. The Harvard paper says touchpoints like armrests, tray tables, belt buckles, window blinds, and toilet locks need to be cleaned frequently. Deeper cleans need to occur overnight or when there is enough time between flights. The good news is airlines are already onto this.


Managing social distancing is arguably the hardest task of all. Airlines can make deliberate choices about flight loads and spreading passengers throughout the cabin. However, anyone who has been through an airport lately knows controlling people clustering together at departure gates and around concourses is a tougher ask. However, the research paper says airlines should do what they can; *"Implementing the layered risk mitigation strategies described in this report requires passenger and airline compliance. It will help to ensure that air travel, with respect to SARS-COVID-19 transmission, is as safe or substantially safer than the routine activities people undertake during these times"* It's not just up to the airlines. The Harvard paper says passengers need to step up and play a role as well. They say that in addition to wearing face masks in airport terminals and on flights, passengers need to abide by the rules and monitor their own health. The paper's authors suggest passengers who don't play by the rules get placed on a no-fly list and barred from travelling. *"Enforcement is a powerful motivator to achieve passenger behavioural compliance"* the paper says.

Maintaining a proper social distance in airports can be a challenge, Photo: Seattle Airport Newsroom

Representing the interests of commercial air travel around the world, IATA is presenting a new analysis that shows the airline industry *"cannot slash costs sufficiently to neutralise severe cash burn to avoid bankruptcies and preserve jobs in 2021"* As such, the group is again calling for government relief measures to sustain airlines financially and avoid massive employment terminations. *"The fourth quarter of 2020 will be extremely difficult, and there is little indication the first half of 2021 will be significantly better, so long as borders remain closed and/or arrival quarantines remain in place. Without additional government financial relief, the median airline has just 8.5 months of cash remaining at current burn rates. And we can't cut costs fast enough to catch up with shrunken revenues"* – Alexandre de Juniac, IATA's Director General and CEO

IATA says that governments need to step up and support their airline industries in order to avoid closures and massive employee layoffs. Photo: Getty Images

Here are the worrisome numbers resulting from IATA's analysis of the industry:

-  Total industry revenues in 2021 are expected to be down 46% compared to the 2019 figure of \$838 billion. This is a further downgrade from the previous prediction of a 29% decline resulting from delayed recovery, fresh COVID-19 outbreaks and waves, and unwavering government-mandated travel restrictions.
- IATA expects full-year 2020 traffic to be down 66% compared to 2019, with December demand down 68%.
- Although most airlines have done everything in their power to reduce costs (layoffs, aircraft retirements, etc.), the drop in passenger revenues has been far greater. Based on a sample of 76 airlines,

the year-on-year decline in operating costs for the second quarter was 48% compared with a 73% decline in operating revenues.

IATA presents two big reasons for its grim analysis and prediction for 2021.

Firstly, airlines have parked thousands of mostly long-haul aircraft and shifted their operations to short-haul flying where possible. Therefore, when looking at distance flown in relation to aircraft flying, relatively more aircraft must operate the network. Thus, flown capacity (ASKs – airline seat kilometres) is down 62% compared to January 2019, but the in-service fleet is down just 21%.

Secondly, around 60% of the world's passenger aircraft are leased. Despite receiving some reductions from lessors, rental costs have dropped less than 10% over the past year.

Even if that unprecedented reduction in labour costs were to be achieved, total costs would still be higher than revenues in 2021, and airlines will continue to burn through cash. – IATA

IATA has several suggestions to deal with the dire situation.

In its latest press release, the group says that it is critical that airports and air navigation service providers (ANSP) avoid cost increases to fill gaps in budgets. Instead, it calls on these two groups to also cut costs and also defer capital expenditures, borrow on capital markets and/or seek government financial relief.

IATA is also calling for pre-flight COVID-19 testing to open borders and enable travel without quarantine. This is already happening with some airlines and jurisdictions, and being trialled by other authorities.

IATA says that establishing more pre-flight COVID-19 testing will help to open borders and enable more travel (without the need for quarantine). Photo: Vincenzo Pace | JFKJets.com

Certainly, an extremely unpopular move for any airline, IATA sees further job reductions or pay cuts as necessary to reduce unit labour costs and maintain 2019 levels of labour productivity (ASKs per employee). However, the group makes it clear that it is *"not advocating specific workforce reductions."*

The biggest factor, according to IATA, is government intervention. *"Unless governments act fast, some 1.3 million airline jobs are at risk. And that would have a domino effect putting 3.5 million additional jobs in the aviation sector in jeopardy along with a total of 46 million people in the broader economy whose jobs are supported by aviation" – IATA*

The group says that Governments must take firm action to avoid this *"impending economic and labour catastrophe"* calling on them to *"step forward with additional financial relief measures."*

Government bailouts, pre-flight COVID testing, relief for airports/ANSPs – Do you agree with IATA's evaluation of the situation and its proposed solutions? Let us know your thoughts in the comments.