

## British Thoracic Society

### Points to consider when planning air travel by passengers with respiratory disease during the endemic phase of COVID-19

#### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unforeseen worldwide lockdowns, and abrupt reductions in domestic and international commercial air travel. Air travel can present well-recognised challenges for those with a wide variety of respiratory conditions. These are addressed in the 2011 BTS Recommendations on Air Travel (1). Publication of a British Thoracic Society (BTS) Clinical Statement on Air Travel is due in late 2020.

In the meantime, with gradual relaxation of lockdown measures globally, some demand for air travel is likely to return. Many aspects of planning for, and undertaking, air travel will be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this situation is likely to persist for some considerable time. The aim of this statement is not to address specific aspects of COVID-19, or to advise individuals whether it is safe or practical to travel, as this will remain a personal decision. The statement is intended to signpost passengers, their care givers, and the professionals advising them, to reliable and practical information to help inform planning and decisions on how and whether to travel by air.

#### National and international regulations

Over the decades since the Second World War, passengers have increasingly become accustomed to open borders worldwide, with relatively few restrictions on domestic or international travel, especially to popular tourist destinations. This situation has now changed beyond all recognition, and individual freedoms previously taken for granted are subject to new national and international laws.

Various restrictions have been implemented by governmental and airline regulatory authorities. These include not travelling or boarding a commercial flight if passengers:

- are unwell with symptoms of COVID-19
- have been asked to self-isolate by government authorities in any country
- have been in contact with anyone who is unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 or who has been asked to self-isolate by government authorities in any country

Before considering travel, passengers must now consult existing regulations both within their country of origin and at their destination. If the intended journey involves stopover(s) in one or more different countries, regulations for those countries will also need to be observed. There may be restrictions on the kind of travel, and the purpose(s) for which travel is allowed, and there may be significant self-isolation periods imposed on arrival at their destination and/or upon their return. Some countries may require a negative COVID-19 combined throat and nose swab test before departure and/or upon arrival. Others may require contact details, including an address at destination. Guidance and regulations may change frequently, so those considering travel must consult relevant websites regularly and keep up to date with the situation in their country of origin and at their destination.

In the UK, the decision as to whether travel is essential is currently considered a personal one. However, anyone planning to travel against UK government advice should check the validity of their travel insurance, as insurers may refuse to cover travel in these circumstances. They should also be aware that there is a risk they may not be able to complete their return journey as planned, because services may be reduced or suspended with little or no notice. They should consider the healthcare implications for their condition, including the possibility of an interruption to their supply of usual

medication. Prospective passengers should also be aware that many airlines have cut capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Routes, timetables, and airport terminals they envisaged using may be unavailable.

Passengers should consult airline and airport websites for details of arrangements and regulations now in place. They may be required to undergo temperature screening and/or complete health questionnaires on departure and/or arrival. They may be required to supply and wear face coverings or masks on arrival at the airport and during the flight. For long haul flights passengers may be required to bring a supply of masks to cover the duration of the flight.

Passengers with longstanding respiratory symptoms such as cough may be subject to additional attention from aircrew and fellow passengers. It would therefore seem prudent for them to carry with them a summary of their health condition(s). Scanned copies of previous relevant clinic letters and medication, downloaded to their smartphone, may be practical. This information will be even more important for those hoping to avoid wearing a mask on health grounds.

The following websites provide further information:

<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>

UK government advice on travel to 225 countries and territories. Free email registration service enabling regular updates for specific regions.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-air-travel-guidance-for-passengers>

UK government advice on how to travel safely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<https://www.iata.org/en/youandiata/travelers/health/>

International Air Transport Association (IATA) advice for travellers including coronavirus FAQ. Aligned with World Health Organisation (WHO) updates.

### **Pre-flight screening, including hypoxic challenge testing**

Healthcare facilities throughout the world have been, and continue to be, challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. The NHS is no exception. Although healthcare services in the UK have not been formally overwhelmed, the capacity created to address the needs of COVID-19 patients came at the expense of routine and elective services, many of which were suspended. Reorganisation and resumption of routine NHS services, with the need to prevent previously tolerated levels of overcrowding in public spaces, enable social distancing and provide a safe environment for patients and staff, will take time. Lung function testing capacity has fallen very significantly, because many tests are regarded by several expert groups as aerosol-generating procedures (AGPs). Guidance varies between countries, but healthcare staff are likely to be required to wear PPE, and to clean and ventilate testing rooms between patients. Urgent and essential care and testing are thus being prioritised.

Passengers contemplating air travel must therefore be aware that they may face considerable barriers to pre-flight screening in primary care, as well as a lack of resources to perform hypoxic challenge testing in secondary care. Respiratory physiology staff may be unable to perform quick, informal checks of existing patient equipment. Passengers should contact their proposed airline early on to find out what assessments may be required. They should be aware that airlines can deny boarding to any passenger if they have concerns about their fitness to undertake the journey. Passengers should also check requirements with their healthcare insurance provider; and ensure that they have adequate cover for their condition and proposed itinerary.

<https://www.blf.org.uk/support-for-you/going-on-holiday/flying-with-a-lung-condition>

Practical information and advice for those with a lung condition planning air travel

<https://www.europeanlung.org/en/lung-disease-and-information/air-travel/>

Information on airline oxygen policies; Information on European oxygen providers

### **Medications and equipment**

Airlines may limit or prohibit 'carry on' or hand baggage. Essential medications required on board the aircraft may therefore need pre-flight approval and may need to be contained in a clear plastic bag. Use of portable nebulisers on board is likely to be prohibited, as many experts are concerned that nebulisers are aerosol-generating and may spread infection. Airlines may also prohibit use of portable fans; and restrict them to the hold.

### **Oxygen**

Airlines may currently have reduced capacity to guarantee oxygen provision in flight. Passengers must therefore check whether their requirements can be met with their proposed airline well beforehand.

### **Ventilatory support**

It is likely that use of NIV and/or CPAP devices on board will be prohibited, as they are aerosol-generating and risk spreading infection. Passengers must check with their airline beforehand whether they can take them on board. Patients with tracheostomies should be aware that tracheostomy care (suction) is regarded as an AGP, and likely to be prohibited on board. There may be restrictions on the use of aerosol-generating devices, and nebulisers, in their proposed holiday accommodation, and passengers must check first.

### **Summary**

Undertaking air travel in the current COVID-19 pandemic presents airlines and passengers with various safety concerns. Even under normal circumstances air travel for those with respiratory conditions can present challenges. During a pandemic these are compounded by the risk of viral transmission, and aerosol generation from respiratory treatment adjuncts. Regulatory authorities in many different countries have imposed strict entry criteria which must be followed, and awareness of these before travel is essential. This document highlights the questions that passengers with respiratory conditions currently planning commercial air travel may face. The authors hope that signposting important resources and websites will help those who need to undertake air travel address these well in advance.

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### **References**

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