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THE MIDDLE SEAT

Can Airport Covid Testing Get People Flying Again?

Airports and airlines are searching for ways to avoid long quarantines that turn travelers off. How well they work remains to be seen.

By Scott McCartney

Air travel can test your patience. Now it's going to test your health.

Airports and airlines are rushing to offer preflight Covid-19 testing to help passengers avoid 14-day quarantines imposed by certain states and many foreign governments. The goal: to build confidence in travel.

Hawaiian Airlines has started offering passengers a \$150 at-home saliva test ahead of flights. Passengers self-collect while being watched on a video call and ship the tests overnight.

Airports from Oakland, Calif., to Bradley International near Hartford, Conn., are opening testing centers for ticketed passengers. Some offer both the PCR test, which can take 48 hours to get results, and rapid tests that provide results in 15 minutes but are less accurate. In Alaska, nonresidents who land in Anchorage without negative test results within 72 hours are required to take a \$250 test and self-quarantine until negative results are posted. Alaska residents who didn't test before arrival can get tested for free or self-quarantine for 14 days.

“We, as an airport, aren't just going to sit around and let this thing take us down. We're going to do everything we can to make this better in some way,” says Joe Lopano, chief executive at Tampa International in Florida.

Tampa began offering testing to travelers on Oct. 1. Of the 80 people tested on the first day, one was positive for Covid-19. She canceled her flight and went home, Mr. Lopano says. Mr. Lopano himself tested positive on Friday but reported no immediate symptoms.

Passenger testing is seen as a way to limit the spread of Covid-19, but it won't eliminate it. Several Caribbean islands began accepting visitors who had a negative test within 72 hours of arrival, and the number of Covid-19 cases has jumped.

The fundamental problem is that someone could get infected after taking the test, and that testing isn't always accurate. Also, the virus may take several days to show up on a test. It appears that a plan emphasizing testing proved imperfect at the White House.

Most airlines, including the U.S. carriers offering testing, require that passengers wear masks. All have stepped up disinfecting and cleaning; a few are still blocking middle seats. But airlines have found those precautions alone haven't won back confidence that travel is a relatively safe activity. Some airlines are studying the feasibility of designating certain flights as Covid-tested trips, with all passengers aboard tested before takeoff. Medical checks—whether temperature-taking, verifying test results or, in the future, examining vaccination records—may become as common as walking through a metal detector.

Lufthansa saw summer traffic jump when airports in Frankfurt and Munich began offering testing and the German government agreed that people with negative tests didn't have to quarantine for 14 days. Christoph Leffers, head of the testing task force at Lufthansa Group, says testing can not only build consumer confidence, but also give government authorities data needed to reduce travel restrictions.

“We are now preparing ourselves for testing to be an integral part of the customer journey,” Mr. Leffers says. [More on Travel Safety](#)

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Enforcement can be a challenge, though many countries now require proof of a negative test before you board your flight, just like a passport check. For states, it's more difficult, though Hawaii will put arriving passengers through lines where state officials check test documentation.

Hawaii, which has a mandatory 14-day quarantine for anyone arriving, is planning to waive that for people with negative tests within 72 hours of arrival beginning Oct. 15. Lt. Gov. Josh Green, a physician who has suffered a mild case of Covid-19, says it's a necessary risk to help workers and businesses survive.

"We cannot put our head in the sand and wait until March or April or May until a vaccine has significantly decreased risk," he says. "This is the safest you can do and have any hope of restoring economic activity."

The lieutenant governor argues that while one in 500 people have Covid-19, a single predeparture test reduces that to about one in 2,000. That means two or three people a day might slip through. "Hawaii can handle that," he says.

Some Hawaiian mayors have argued the state should require a second test after arrival—a final decision is expected this week. Dr. Green, the state's Covid-response leader, says Hawaii doesn't have enough tests for all arriving visitors and that a quarantine requirement of even a few days while awaiting test results would discourage tourists significantly. He has proposed spot-testing 10% of arriving passengers.

Hawaii will require a nucleic acid amplification test, which includes PCR and some newer rapid tests, administered by one of its partner organizations, including airlines, some drugstore chains and testing labs. Travelers will have to complete a health form and upload test results to travel.hawaii.gov. Arriving passengers will line up to be cleared by state officials at the airport. If they don't have the proper test, they can self-quarantine for 14 days—and state officials say they will visit hotels or residences to make sure people are isolating—or turn around and go home. Violators face a criminal offense punishable by a \$5,000 fine and a year in prison. Basic precautions like masks, along with social distancing and avoiding crowded indoor spaces, will remain key to reducing virus spread, Dr. Green says.

To resurrect travel, industry leaders say uniform standards between countries and even between U.S. states are crucial. That means testing on both ends of a trip, for example, and agreement on which tests are required and when they must be taken.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agrees. “Efforts are currently ongoing internationally to assess the risk reduction, determine what a feasible testing regime for air travel might look like, and gain some level of agreement on standards for a harmonized approach to testing globally in air transportation,” a CDC spokesman says in a written statement.

Hartford’s Bradley Airport decided to make testing available when Connecticut amended its 14-day quarantine requirement for people arriving from states with higher infection rates to exempt anyone with a negative test. Before that, a vacationer leaving Connecticut for a few days of Florida sun would, in theory, have to self-quarantine for 14 days. Though often ignored, quarantine restrictions have been a major factor in grounding air travel.

Offering testing at big airports is a major undertaking, but midsize airports like Bradley can do it, usually in conjunction with a local laboratory, and differentiate to make the airport more attractive to fliers, says Kevin Dillon, executive director of the Connecticut Airport Authority. JetBlue cited the testing as one reason for adding flights at Bradley to Las Vegas, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Cancún, Mexico. At many airports, travelers pay for testing, typically \$50 to \$60 for a rapid test and \$120 to \$130 for a PCR test, which is required by many countries. Many health insurance plans cover the cost. Bermuda set up some of the toughest testing requirements in the world. Now officials think that’s paying off with returning air service. Bermuda requires a negative test before departure—proof now must be uploaded through airline reservation systems—and upon arrival. In addition, subsequent tests are required on Day 4, Day 7 and Day 14 of a stay. Go for two weeks and you’ll be tested five times in Bermuda.

That strict protocol resulted in very low traffic when the island resumed commercial flights on July 1, says Ken Hassard, commercial director at Bermuda Skyport.

Now, as other beach destinations have seen jumps in Covid-19 cases despite 72-hour test requirements, Bermuda is seen as a safer destination and attracting more flights. By December, hotels will be at 55% of December 2019 capacity, he says, a huge jump from the complete shutdown of early summer.

“Turns out safety wins,” Mr. Hassard says.

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