Many people are now asking, “If I am vaccinated, is it OK to travel?” After discouraging domestic travel for over a year, the CDC recently reversed course. According to the agency, “People who are fully vaccinated with an FDA-authorized vaccine can travel safely within the United States.” These travelers do not require testing before or after their trip unless required at their destination. The most welcome news is that fully vaccinated travelers are not required to self-quarantine.

The time has come to pack-up for this next, recovery phase of the COVID-19 crisis. It demands careful steps to follow proper precautions as travel expands. What do you need to know before you head to the airport?

Vaccination is not a cure-all. It is only a step. Each step must balance resumption of pre-COVID activities with continued mitigation of community spread. The crisis is not yet behind us, as evidenced by growing case numbers and spreading variants in many parts of the country.

For the past nine months, we studied what the aviation industry is doing, and what it could be doing, to reduce the risks of disease transmission in airports and on aircraft. What we learned offers guidance as you plan air travel, knowledgeable of both the risks and ways to stay safe.

Until the pandemic is behind us, staying healthy and safe requires layers of protection. You can make those layers work for you. Ventilation is a key layer. COVID-19 is a respiratory disease, so the rapid air distribution and filtration in an aircraft cabin effectively mitigates its spread. The air inhaled by passengers and crew refreshes every two to three minutes, a level of cleaning comparable to breathing in a hospital surgical suite. With each cycle, a HEPA filter cleans 50% of the air, removing disease-carrying particles the size of those linked to COVID. The other 50% is fresh air drawn in from outside the plane.

While these systems operate at capacity when planes are airborne, we found that was not always true when loaded planes parked at the terminal or on the tarmac. We demonstrated the importance of maintaining ventilation systems on the ground as well, which the major U.S. airlines adopted as policy.

The analysis of indoor airport ventilation systems is more complex, since airports vary by size, capacity, and maintenance. The big, auditorium-size architecture of many facilities encourages the necessary airflow. We recommend that airport operators regularly assess ventilation systems to assure that clean, refreshed supply constantly circulates. We further recommend that passengers and employees protect themselves by physical distancing and by wearing masks.
Hygiene is the next layer. Though the risk of catching the disease by surface particles is low, the airlines adopted extensive procedures to disinfect aircraft between flights and overnight. Likewise, airports emphasize COVID mitigation in their cleaning operations, for example with negative air pressure and frequent disinfection in restrooms. The pandemic has accelerated adoption of touchless technologies. Use them when you can.

The most important protective layer and defense is source control: your personal behavior and that of others. There is abundant evidence that face masks significantly reduce transmission. The federal government now mandates masks on public transit, to include airports and aircraft. Keep yourself covered.

With these public health safety measures in place, why the remaining talk of reluctance regarding travel? First, there are the variants. In addition, there is behavior once at a destination or the migration of disease from one spot to the next. Picture large social gatherings such as wild spring break parties. That is why at all points of travel, compliance with mitigation strategies is your key to staying healthy. Know where you’re going and the extra precautions you might take when you arrive.

If you are vaccinated, strictly follow measures to protect yourself and others. Scientists are still not certain if a vaccinated person can catch or transmit the disease. In a global pandemic, we share responsibility for ourselves and responsibility for one another. That lesson can open the doors, safely, to those trips we have all been itching to take.

It is time for people in this country to declare “Enough!” All crises eventually reach their end. If we are going to defeat COVID-19, it will require everyone to work together into a cohesive, protective national bubble. Whether it is travel, work, or school, we all look forward to hearing “Welcome Back” for everything we again hope to do.

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