



Is it Safe to Travel?

By Erin O'Brien



Here we are, four months after my first Core Health article on COVID-19, and I hate that I'm still writing about it. I thought about choosing another topic, but as many people are starting to get back to some kind of normal, I felt writing about travel was timely. Ironically, I write this as I'm on a Delta flight, 30,000 feet in the air. In my (very humble) opinion, the answer to the title question is yes, it's safe to travel. Here's why.

Before we took off today, our pilot made an announcement. He said there was a great deal of misinformation on the national news circuit (crazy, right?) about the air in airline cabins and wanted to make sure we knew the facts. Delta Airlines aircraft recirculate their cabin air every

two minutes. Each plane has hospital-grade HEPA (high-energy particulate air) filters which remove 99.997% of virus-sized particles. The entire volume of cabin air is removed every two minutes – half is pushed outside, and the other half passes through the HEPA filter. Fresh outside air is then pumped in, combined with the filtered air and blown into the cabin from the top air vents down. This vertical top-to-bottom flow ensures all passengers are breathing fresh, clean air. Other major airlines have similar processes for cleaning and recirculating cabin air. Additionally, Delta, along with Alaska Airlines, Hawaiian Airlines, JetBlue and Southwest Airlines block the middle seats to reduce the number of people in the cabin

and their proximity to each other. All surfaces on the planes are sanitized between each flight and flight attendants hand out sanitizing wipes to each passenger upon boarding. All passengers and crew are required to wear masks (without the valves) in the airport, gates areas and on the plane. Personally, I believe there has never been a safer time to fly.

However, keep in mind not all airlines follow every single one of these rigorous safety procedures. Allegiant, American, Frontier, Spirit and United do not block out the middle seats, so planes can be much more crowded. See Fig. 1 for current airline policies regarding cleaning procedures, facemasks, seat blocking and more. Choose your airline accordingly.

Fig. 1

Airline	Masks required (crew)	Masks available (passengers)	Masks required (passengers)	Cleaning before every flight	Limited seat selection	Middle seats not sold	Back-to-front boarding
Alaska	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Allegiant	Yes	Yes**	Yes		Yes		Yes
American	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			
Delta	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Frontier	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Hawaiian	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
JetBlue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Southwest	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes*	Yes*	
Spirit	Yes		Yes		Yes		
Sun Country	Yes		Yes				
United	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes

Fig. 2

All the states below have varying levels of travel restrictions for visitors and/or returning residents. Please review your states guidelines prior to travel.

Alaska	New Jersey
Connecticut	New Mexico
Hawaii	New York
Illinois	Ohio
Kansas	Pennsylvania
Kentucky	Rhode Island
Maine	Vermont
Massachusetts	Washington D.C.
New Hampshire	Wisconsin

Besides dirty cabin air, another presumption about travel is that traveling through airports and touching multiple surfaces could also increase risk for transmission of COVID. The CDC has largely determined that the risk of contracting COVID via surface contact is extremely low. Airborne transmission is the most likely mode, and masks and social distancing have proven to reduce that risk dramatically. So, if you are traveling through an airport, on a bus or train or in a car, disinfecting surfaces and frequent hand washing will all but eliminate the risk of transmission via surface contact. In this case, air travel is no more likely to spread COVID via surfaces than going to your local grocery store or gas station.

Each situation and person remain unique in their risk of contracting COVID, and high-risk individuals are more likely to have severe symptoms if infected. So, each person must consider their own risk and determine what is best for them. If you have a condition that could make you more susceptible to severe symptoms, like diabetes, respiratory disease, heart disease, cancer or obesity, then you should take additional precautions to keep yourself safe. This may mean not traveling.

Full disclosure – I had COVID-19 back in June. I contracted it from friends who I took an 8-hour road trip with. They think they were infected while eating at a restaurant indoors, where another diner was infected. My

symptoms were very mild, a slight sore throat, headache, fatigue, body aches and congestion. It felt like I had allergies or a sinus infection (both of which are common for me). Had my friends not gotten tested before they went to visit family, I wouldn't have taken the test and confirmed a positive diagnosis. I never had a fever, cough, shortness of breath, chest pain or any of the other common symptoms that at the time were certain indicators of COVID infection. Once I learned I was likely exposed, I self-quarantined for 14 days (which when you don't really have symptoms is extremely boring. There's only so much Netflix a person can watch. I made a lot of bread and cleaned out my closet). I let the few people I had close contact with know I tested positive and thankfully, did not spread it to anyone else. I tell you this because I know that I now have the COVID antibodies that will prevent me from getting infected again in the next few months and spreading it to others. So, I travel knowing that it's almost impossible for me to be infected. I also consider myself to be a relatively young, healthy person which I sincerely believe was the main reason why my symptoms were so mild. I still believe that air travel is safer than dining indoors at a restaurant – no air filtering or circulation there.

While air travel is generally safe, it's important to check your local state or national guidelines and regulations. Many states require

a 14-day self-quarantine to enter as a visitor or if you are a resident returning from an area that has previously been a COVID hotspot. See Fig. 2 for a list of states with current restrictions. Many countries are not allowing Americans to enter at the time this article was published. (One especially important exception – Bermuda! Americans can travel to Bermuda without restriction, so be sure to make your plans to attend the March 2-6, 2021 CSDA Convention in Bermuda!)

Again, all decisions to travel should be individualized and state and national guidelines should be followed. But if you are a healthy individual and are willing to take a few extra precautions, air travel is relatively safe, even during times of Corona. Pack your bags and join CSDA at our Winter Board & Committee Meetings in Nashville, TN, December 2-3, 2020!

Erin O'Brien, MS, ATC is a Certified Athletic Trainer and VP/COO for O'Brien International, the association management company that manages the Concrete Sawing & Drilling Association, and Executive Director of CSDA. O'Brien received her Bachelor of Science degree in Athletic Training from Ohio University and her Master of Science degree in Applied Physiology and Kinesiology from the University of Florida. She is also a Certified Level 2 CrossFit Instructor and member of CrossFit9 in St. Petersburg, FL. She is a regular contributor to Concrete Openings magazine. She can be reached at erin@csda.org or 727-577-5002.