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## Ready for another preboarding probe?

Airlines want TSA to screen passengers for fever.

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Alamy

It's a dicey proposition, risking the outrage of travelers sent packing for a procedure that experts say won't keep COVID off planes.

A temperature check could be part of the itinerary the next time you fly.

Airlines for America, the trade group representing U.S. carriers, is asking the Transportation Security Administration to take the temperatures of passengers before allowing them to board. But TSA hasn't decided whether it will add temperature screening to its security duties.

It's one of several likely changes to air travel in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, and it's perhaps the most disruptive to passengers. Travel is down more than 90 percent, but airlines are trying to prepare for when it picks up. They've begun requiring crew and travelers to wear masks and trying to avoid crowding passengers too close together.

Airlines already are taking temperatures of their employees when they report for work and sending them home if they have fevers. But taking passengers' temperatures is a dicey proposition. People say they want to be safe from COVID, but it's not hard to imagine them being outraged if they arrive at the airport or the gate only to be turned away.

Although China and some other countries have used temperature screening since the SARS outbreak in 2003, it hasn't proven effective against pandemic illnesses, particularly COVID-19. Preventing passengers from boarding flights, dating back to the security procedures that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, is fraught with challenges.

"Taking temperatures isn't the answer," says Sheldon Jacobson, a computer science professor at the University of Illinois who is an expert in airport security risk assessment and has done research in infectious disease trends. "Studies have shown that taking temperatures of people doesn't work in detecting Ebola and other diseases. There are so many reasons why people have a fever."

Half or more of those who test positive for COVID-19 don't have a fever or other common symptoms.

"It's why just checking temperatures will help, but it's not the solution by itself," says Dr. Emily Landon, an infectious-disease expert at the University of Chicago. "We need masks and social distancing. Temperature screening is a step up from nothing. Every little bit helps. I'm concerned people will see it as: 'They're checking temps, so everything's fine.' It's not the most important or sensitive test."

## **SCREENING**

Landon recommends airlines also question passengers as part of the screening process about other symptoms they might have or contact with people who had COVID.

Frontier Airlines, which flies out of O'Hare International Airport, offered some clues about what the process might look like when it announced recently that it intends to take passengers' temperatures at the departure gate beginning June 1 if TSA doesn't do it. United and American airlines decline to comment.

"Customers will be screened via touchless thermometers prior to boarding," Frontier said. "If a customer's temperature reading is 100.4 degrees or higher, they will be given time to rest, if the flight departure time allows, before receiving a second check. If the second check is 100.4 degrees or higher, a Frontier gate agent will explain to the customer that they will not be flying that day for the health and safety of others. Frontier will work with that customer to rebook travel on a later date or otherwise accommodate the traveler's preference with respect to their reservation."

According to United's contract of carriage, it already has the right to refuse to transport "passengers who appear to have symptoms of or have a communicable disease (or there is reason to believe there was exposure to a communicable disease)."

"There will be people pretty upset," says Thatcher Stone, who teaches aviation law at the University of Virginia. "The airlines and A4A are smart to ask TSA to do this because they don't want fights and lawsuits with people who freak out when they're told they can't fly. It's different if a government employee does it."

### **'VERY COMPLICATED'**

TSA hasn't made up its mind on temperature screening. "TSA continues to rely on the health expertise of HHS and the CDC," the agency says. "Ongoing discussions with our (Department of Homeland Security) and interagency colleagues, as well as our airport and airline partners, will enable the agency to make informed decisions with regard to the health and safety of the aviation environment."

If TSA were to take over screening, "it gets very complicated," says Justin Oberman, who helped set up the agency after the 9/11 attacks. "Enforcement is tough, but the appeal process and liability are really tough. Sending somebody home gets really dicey. Not letting people fly is all or nothing. There are pitfalls everywhere you look."

He says if mandatory temperature testing happens, one likely scenario is that it would be tested at a small number of airports.

Screening is hardly foolproof. Passengers can game the system by taking ibuprofen or drinking water or cold drinks to lower their temperatures, or lie about their symptoms or

exposure to people who've had COVID. Jacobson, the U of I professor, and others suggest that airlines already have a powerful tool to get passengers to go along with screening: allowing customers to rebook their flights without penalties.

"They're going to have to continue that," he says. "If you don't do that, people are going to misrepresent their situations."

Inline Play

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