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Now you'll have to pass a health screening to fly United Airlines

Next time you check in, you'll be asked if you have symptoms like a fever or a loss of smell. And if you fail the test . . .

JOHN PLETZ ☐ ☐

United Airlines says it's requiring passengers to answer questions about their health before they fly.

The Chicago-based carrier says it's the first U.S. airline to require flyers to answer the questions, which are a common screening tool in hospitals and other settings. United already is requiring passengers to wear masks onboard aircraft to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Among the screening questions that went into effect yesterday, passengers checking in at the airport will be asked to verify that they have not been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 21 days and that they have not had close contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19 in the last 14 days.

Passengers will be asked to verify they have not experienced any of the following symptoms in the past 14 days, excluding symptoms from pre-existing conditions:

• temperature of 38 C/100.4 F or higher
• cough
• shortness of breath/difficulty breathing
• chills
• muscle pain
• sore throat
• recent loss of taste or smell

They'll also be asked to verify they have not been denied boarding by another airline due to a medical screening for a communicable disease in the last 14 days.

Passengers who fail the screening will be allowed an opportunity to reschedule or request a flight credit.

Airlines have been wrestling with safety precautions related to the coronavirus, but it's taking on greater importance as people have slowly begun to travel more in recent weeks as states have relaxed requirements to stay at home.

United says its July schedule will be 75 percent lower than a year ago, but it's an improvement from current schedules, which are down about 90 percent. The Transportation Security Administration has reported passenger screenings at airports have been closer to 85 percent below normal than the 95 percent levels seen in April. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics said 3 million passengers flew on the major U.S. airlines in April, the lowest level since it began keeping records in 1974. The previous monthly low was 14.6 million passengers in 1975.

"United's 'Ready-to-Fly' wellness checklist sets clear guidelines on health requirements for our customers and helps minimize the risk of exposure during the travel experience," the

company said in a statement.

Airlines have discussed the possibility of taking passengers' temperatures before allowing them to board planes, but medical experts have said screening questions are important tools. There are worries, however, that passengers will lie or otherwise game the system.

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, said in a recent interview with Crain's that airlines will need to offer travelers the option to rebook at no cost. "If you don't do that, people are going to misrepresent their situations."