

Vaccination mandates on flights are not an omicron solution. Airport testing is a better idea. [Corrected 12/03/2021]

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FULL TEXT

President Joe Biden's administration has introduced new COVID-19 vaccination requirements for travelers into the United States. Mandated vaccination with an approved set of vaccines remains the easiest pathway into the country, with those who are vaccine-exempt subject to more severe testing requirements.

With the omicron variant an emerging threat, point of departure testing on international flights becomes even more critical.

This begs the question, should there also be a vaccination requirement for domestic flights, given the emergence of omicron and that we are now in the heavy holiday travel season?

Public sentiment supports such a mandate, which has elicited pressure from lawmakers.

In spite of such calls, the answer is no.

The COVID-19 vaccines have proved to be remarkably effective. Vaccinated individuals reap tremendous personal benefits. They are kept out of hospitals and are less like to die, with reduced risk of infection an added benefit. The population benefits significantly from fewer people requiring medical care and less virus circulation.

Breakthrough infections continue to occur, which means that just because a person is vaccinated, it does not mean that they cannot be infected. Nor are they immune from spreading the virus.

Vaccination reduces the risk of infection and spreading the virus, but it does not eliminate such risks. This means that the greatest risks on an airplane are to those who are unvaccinated, a choice they likely made for themselves, given the widespread availability of the vaccines at no cost.

The waning protection offered by the vaccines over time further complicates any vaccination mandate. As such, a person fully vaccinated two months ago is better protected than a person vaccinated eight months ago, everything else being equal. This is also the case for natural immunity, with protection waning over time. Therefore, checking each passenger's vaccination status must also include when their last dose was administered. Without such information, each person's vaccination status offers different levels of protection, which would be a challenge to capture with a vaccination mandate.

Overall, a vaccination mandate would provide a false sense of health security on airplanes and in airports.

On a practical level, verifying every traveler's vaccination status can be complicated. The majority of people have a vaccination verification card. What if a person claims to be vaccinated, but cannot produce their verification card, complete with which vaccine they received and the dates of vaccination? Would they be denied boarding? What about forged or tampered cards? Are airport personnel equipped to deal with such issues? Vaccination exemptions would further complicate any vaccination mandate. How would they be managed?

What further exacerbates all these checks and verifications is that they add an additional layer of tasks that airline or airport personnel would be required to undertake as they serve the massive number of domestic flyers. The most likely scenario is that they would create intolerable flight delays and conflicts between passengers and airline personnel, particularly if a person cannot provide the necessary vaccination or exemption verification information.

All these issues make enforcing any vaccination mandate untenable, effectively creating more chaos than calm.

So what can be done to help make flights more health secure from COVID-19?

Airplanes are equipped to circulate air through high efficiency particulate air filters that exchange cabin air every few minutes. This provides healthy air ventilation during flights. The federal mask mandate adds yet another layer of risk reduction for virus transmission.

When on a commercial flight, the most important health risk factor is not whether people are vaccinated, but whether they are infected. However, asking people for proof of a negative COVID-19 test makes no sense, since the value of such tests ages quickly. Moreover, the variety of tests available may translate into different levels of sensitivity and specificity, creating a veil of uncertainty around each test's interpretation.

It would be better to add on-site testing at the airport.

Just as passengers pass through TSA airport security checkpoints, similar health security checkpoints outside of the security checkpoint area can be set up at airports that provide an at-home test for each traveler. Deploying such mobile sites at airports in areas with high transmission risk would likely be sufficient. However, each airport authority and their airlines should have the option to institute it, rather than requiring it across the entire air system.

COVID-19 vaccines provide remarkable risk reduction benefits. If a person is wise, vaccination offers them significant protection when traveling. But asking all air travelers to provide proof of vaccination is misguided and would create enforcement and verification problems with limited practical benefit.

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CAPTION: Photo: Holiday travelers check in with United Airlines at Terminal 1 of O'Hare International Airport on Sunday at the end of the Thanksgiving weekend. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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