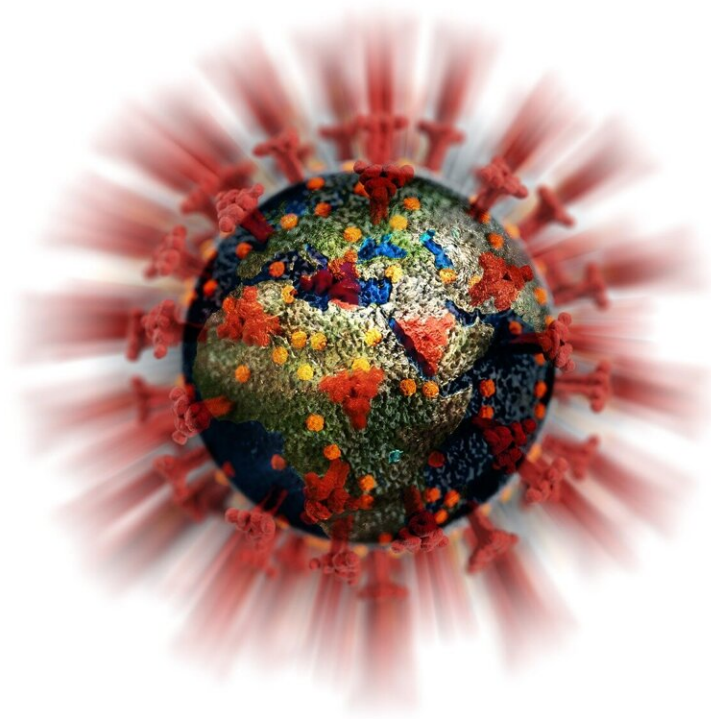


# What the Omicron variant means for your holiday travel

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Since the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus was dubbed "a variant of concern" just after Thanksgiving, a number of countries around the world began imposing new travel restrictions in response to its spread.

And, while not much is known about it yet, leaders have called for calm as we wait to learn more.

"Do not get hysterical. That is not warranted. We just don't know enough," New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy recently said. "Folks, I would say: Accept that there's going to be an uncomfortable period of time here where it's still delta driving cases... and we're going to have to allow the research" on the new [variant](#) to be done.

But the 2021 holiday [travel](#) season is underway, and if you're looking to take a winter getaway or go see family and friends for the holidays, you may be wondering how this will all affect you. After all, when the delta variant emerged earlier in 2021, some countries imposed stricter travel requirements, and many people—as many as 66% of respondents in one survey—delayed travel plans due to the variant.

So, when it comes to travel this holiday season, will the Omicron variant have an impact? And should you cancel your plans right now? Here is what you need to know:

## **How will Omicron affect holiday travel?**

Right now, that's not entirely clear. Scientists and leaders do not yet have enough information about the Omicron variant, but cases have been identified in countries around the world. So, we could see further restrictions go into place.

"There's no information on how severe the disease is, how much the vaccines are working, or how quickly it is spreading," says Michael LeVasseur, assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health. "It's hard to come up with recommendations for holiday travel, even for myself."

For now, though, you do not have to be vaccinated to take domestic flights, or show a negative COVID-19 test (unless you are flying to Hawaii, which has vaccination and testing requirements if you don't want to quarantine once you get there), though the CDC recommends that you delay any travel until you are fully vaccinated, and get tested before and after your trip if that's not possible.

For [international flights](#), the CDC advises that you should be fully vaccinated (there are additional requirements, such as showing a negative COVID-19 test, on before returning to the US).

The federal mask mandate that applies to public transportation is currently set to expire in mid-January, so that may be extended, given that the Transportation Security Administration extended it in August amid the increase of delta variant cases.

The best advice right now: Wait and see. If you have a trip coming up, you should look out for changes in the CDC's travel guidance that could impact your plans.

## **What are the Omicron travel restrictions?**

While it's not yet totally clear what impact the Omicron variant will have on travel overall, there have been some restrictions issued in response to its spread.

Right now, the travel restrictions in the US are:

In the US, travel is restricted for non-US citizens coming from eight southern African countries, including South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Those restrictions do not apply to US citizens or permanent residents, and flights from those countries are not banned entirely.

If you are returning to the US after an international trip and haven't recently recovered from COVID-19, you need to provide proof of a negative test before boarding your flight— even if you're a US citizen. If you're fully vaccinated, you need to take your test no more than three days before your departure (one day if you're not fully vaccinated). But the CDC recently said it is looking at modifying that requirement to be one day before departure for all travelers, regardless of vaccination status. "tags"

Here's how other countries are responding: Canada has barred non-Canadian citizens who have been to South Africa and several other nearby countries since Nov. 12 from entering the country. And in the UK, anyone who enters the country needs to undergo a quarantine period until they get results from a PCR test to be taken within two days of arrival (six African countries, including South Africa, have also been added to the country's "red list"). A number of other countries, including Australia, France, Germany, and others have announce travel restrictions relating to South Africa and other nearby countries. Other nations, such as Israel and Japan, have closed their borders to non-citizens overall.

But a number of studies suggest that such travel bans and restrictions have not been proven effective at preventing the spread of infectious diseases. Additionally, the World Health Organization recently issued a statement saying that travel restrictions "place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods" of the people in countries impacted by them, and that if they are instituted, they should based in science and "not be unnecessarily invasive or intrusive."

## **Is it safe to travel this winter?**

Again, that's hard to say.

But at least currently the public health measures you can take as an

individual are pretty much the same as they have been throughout the pandemic—that is, wear a mask, get vaccinated, social distance, and stay home if you are sick, says LeVasseur.

"Whatever your risk is, the risk isn't new," LeVasseur says. "This isn't March 2020. Now, we have more information and effective treatments. If you want to make travel plans, go for it—just know your risk. If you are visiting someone at higher risk, take that into mind, too."

Seth Welles, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Drexel University's Dornsife School of public health, agrees, noting that "we know what to do" when it comes to mitigating risk when traveling. But another step you can take to protect yourself now is getting a booster shot, which are available to all adults.

In fact, as the CDC recently recommended, all adults should get booster shots if they are at least six months out from their last shot of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, or two months out from the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

"This is a reason to get boosted. Not only do you get more antibodies, but there is an opportunity for more antibody diversity," Welles says. "People should be vaccinated, and try to get boosted now—you want to give yourself a couple weeks to develop antibodies. It's time to do it."

## **Should I cancel my trip because of the Omicron variant?**

That's a personal decision, and it depends on factors like your risk for severe illness, your tolerance for that risk, where you're going, and what happens with the Omicron variant as the holidays arrive. But right now, Welles says, "there's time" to figure out what you're going to do, whether

that means domestic or international travel.

"I wouldn't cancel it yet. You have to play it by ear," Welles says.

"People should put together a strategy of how to minimize risk, and figure out how to have a normal-as-possible holiday while reducing your risk."

That, Welles adds, means keeping an eye out for the latest information about the Omicron variant's spread and effects, and following the usual risk mitigation steps like getting vaccinated, wearing masks in public places, practicing social distancing, and washing your hands. Overall, you should just be careful and deliberate about what you choose to do.

"For people who have stopped wearing masks or thinking about [COVID-19], you need to start thinking again," Welles says. "If [you] should become infected, there are treatment options that are effective. That is not a reason to not be careful, but people should not be totally panicked about this."

## **Should I buy travel insurance because of COVID-19 variants?**

If you are concerned about having to cancel a trip over the Omicron variant or COVID-19 in general, you might want to consider buying travel insurance.

A couple of things to know: As the Pennsylvania Insurance Department notes online, most standard travel insurance won't cover cancellations over concern about COVID-19 (most, however, cover cancellations if you get sick).

So, you may want to look for a "Cancel For Any Reason" (CFAR)

policy, which allows you to cancel a trip regardless of the reason and often reimburse a defined percentage of your travel costs.

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