

Is it safe to travel right now? What health experts are doing for the holidays this year

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When health expert Thomas Russo spoke to USA TODAY in early

October, the end of the pandemic seemed within reach.

"I look very much forward to the day, and I don't think we're far off. I think it'll be very early 2022 where most of this is behind us," Russo, chief of the University of Buffalo's division of infectious diseases, said at the time.

Since then, a new variant of concern has emerged and quickly taken over as the dominant coronavirus variant within the U.S. Cases are rising, countries across the globe are announcing new entry requirements and tourist hotspots are shutting down once again. After nearly two years into the pandemic, it almost feels like we're back to square one.

So does that mean you should cancel your upcoming trip for the holidays?

While some should consider pushing back their plans, health experts say there are ways to travel safely this holidays season.

"I'm not recommending everyone cancel their trip," said Keri Althoff, associate professor of the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's epidemiology department. "(But) everyone must recognize that the risk has increased due to the new variant of SARS-CoV-2. That's what we need to be mindful of and walk through our decision-making process again."

Should I travel for Christmas?

Unlike last year, the federal government has not issued a warning against holiday travel. While officials warn that breakthrough cases are possible with omicron, vaccinations and masks can help protect travelers against infection and severe illness.

Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious diseases expert, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that holiday travel is possible if people are "prudent," even if it does carry an increased chance of infection. President Joe Biden said Tuesday that Americans can safely celebrate the holidays with family and friends "if you and those you celebrate with are vaccinated, particularly if you've gotten your booster shot."

Health experts tend to agree that getting together with family and friends for the holidays is OK, and even good for mental wellbeing, if done right. Just know that gatherings may require extra precautions this year, such as testing, mask-wearing, vaccinations and booster shots.

"We understand that the mental health toll as we come into what would be the third year of this pandemic is very significant," Chris Beyrer, a professor of epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, told USA TODAY. "People need to get together with their loved ones. They just need to try and do that safely."

Althoff suggests travelers think through the risks before committing to their trip. Risks will drop for people who are vaccinated with booster shots and who gather with people who wear a mask properly in public.

"Your risk when you booked this trip is different now, so it's important to keep that in mind. Particularly if you're someone or you're traveling with somebody who has any risk factor that could lead to more severe illness," Althoff said. "It's just really important we add a few layers of protection right now."

Beyrer said travelers should take a coronavirus test before visiting others. While free at-home tests from the [federal government](#) won't be available until January, rapid antigen tests are as low as \$14 for a pack of two at some retailers and can take less than 15 minutes to give results.

This can be an especially useful safeguard when visiting with someone who is immunocompromised or not yet eligible for boosters.

Beyrer and other experts also say it's best to keep any indoor gatherings small.

"This, I think, is going to be a part of how we're all going to manage the holidays," Beyrer said.

And while it may not be an easy decision, [health experts](#) say it might be wise for some to delay their trip.

"If people absolutely need to travel, they can still do so with all of the precautions," said Lee Riley, chair of the infectious diseases and vaccinology division at the University of California, Berkeley's school of [public health](#). "For air travel, unless you really have to have a family get-together or there's some sort of business trip, I probably would not. I would wait a bit until we learn more about the omicron."

Althoff agreed that pushing back the trip might be the best call in some circumstances.

"(There are travelers) getting together with family members they hadn't seen in two years who may be much older and thinking through how many more holidays they will have together," Althoff said. "(Others) have said, you know what, we're gonna stick closer to home and try for a spring trip."

What the holidays look like for health experts

Beyrer still plans to get together with family for the holidays this year, but only with people who are fully vaccinated with booster shots.

"We're having a boosted Christmas," he said. "(Then) we're having a small dinner party for New Year's Eve that I'm hosting, and everybody's boosted and we're keeping the numbers to 12. And we're not going dancing, which we used to do."

Riley canceled his usual year-end lab party with his students because of the omicron surge but plans to get together with less than a dozen people for Christmas.

"My wife is pregnant, so we have more of a concern and are being more careful," he said.

Althoff, who kept to outdoor vacation activities like beaches and hikes with her family when her children weren't yet eligible for the vaccine, said she had a small gathering with her family over Thanksgiving. She will not be getting together with family members again this year.

"We felt comfortable (getting together over Thanksgiving) given the fact that everybody else was vaccinated and boosted," she said Tuesday, noting that her kids had received their second dose shortly after the holiday. "But omicron has changed all that."

Russo, whose biggest trip in 2021 was a Hawaiian vacation that was focused on outdoor activities like patio dining, is also keeping the festivities low key. He has two children flying in from the West Coast, and while both are boosted, Russo acknowledged that there is a chance of breakthrough infection.

"Once we get to our house, we're going to probably not do much," he said. "We're not going to go out to indoor restaurants, obviously, with masks down indoors. ...We may consider going to a movie theater. But if we do, no popcorn, no drinks, masks up the whole time."

Is it safe to fly right now?

For those who are traveling for the holidays, Russo says traveling in a personal vehicle is safest. Airlines would be the next best option over other forms of public transportation like busses or trains, which don't have the same quality of air filtration.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most newer-model airplanes filter recycled air through HEPA filters, which capture 99.9% of particles, including larger viruses or virus clumps.

The federal mask mandate, which requires masks on planes in airports and on airplanes and other forms of public transportation through March 18, also helps reduce the risk of transmission.

But there are risks, even on a plane—especially with a number of passengers strongly opposed to masking up. Russo said there are ways travelers can take extra precautions.

If the plane hands out drinks or food to passengers, Russo suggests waiting at least 10 minutes to unmask and eat. This gives the other passengers more time to finish their food and mask up before your own mask comes off.

He also suggests eating and drinking strategically to minimize the amount of time the mask is off.

"If it's a short flight, I recommend just keeping your mask on the whole time," he said. "If it's a longer flight if you feel you have to go ahead and do that, what you can do is you can take that sip or bite and then sort of pop that mask back on while you're chewing."

Riley suggests looking at a destination's COVID transmission rates

before flying there. The CDC's list of countries with "very high" COVID risk includes 88 countries as of Monday, including popular destinations like the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and France, and there are destinations within the U.S. like New York that are experiencing their own COVID surge.

Domestic U.S. flights don't ask for a negative coronavirus test—only international flights into the country require a negative viral test no more than one day before travel. Riley said it may be a good idea to get tested regardless to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

"You have to be more careful," he said. "You also have to be vigilant about where you're going to, especially if your destination has people who may not have been fully vaccinated or who are immunosuppressed."

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