

Korean Air says 'strictly manages' radiation exposure after crew death ruling

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A Korean Air flight attendant's cancer death due to cosmic radiation has been ruled a industrial accident.

Korean Air said Tuesday it "strictly manages" cosmic radiation exposure for its flight crew, after a landmark decision ruled an air steward's cancer death was akin to an industrial accident.

The ruling by the state-run Korea Worker's Compensation and Welfare Service—issued last month and sent to AFP Tuesday—found the cancer death of a male flight attendant, who had flown for the flag-carrier for 25 years, resulted from cosmic radiation exposure.

Flight crews are exposed to higher levels of naturally occurring cosmic radiation as the shielding effect of the Earth's atmosphere decreases at higher altitude.

The attendant, identified by his surname Song, spent nearly 1,022 hours on board a plane each year with nearly half of his flights covering long-haul routes to the Americas and Europe.

Such routes expose flight crews to more cosmic radiation because they involve flying over the North Pole, where such radiation is higher due to Earth's magnetic field.

Song was diagnosed with stage four [stomach cancer](#) in April 2021 and died a month later.

Korean Air declined comment on the panel's decision, but denied any wrongdoing.

"Korean Air strictly manages individual data, and crew members can check their accumulated amount of cosmic radiation exposure, which is updated on a monthly basis," the company said in a statement to AFP.

The company limits the radiation exposure to "less than 6mSv a year", it said, which is "a lot stricter than the legal maximum radiation exposure standard of up to 50mSv a year".

While the panel was considering the case, Korean Air denied there was any correlation between the plaintiff's cancer and cosmic radiation,

saying that it limited annual [radiation exposure](#) to under 6mSv for its crews.

But the panel rejected the airline's claim, saying it was possible the plaintiff had been exposed to "more than 100mSv of accumulated radiation" and that the measuring method deployed by the Korean Air could have downplayed the actual amount of radiation.

The ruling is the first time that an official labor body in South Korea has recognized the correlation between cosmic radiation and cancer for [flight attendants](#) as an industrial death.

Korean Air's grasp of the issue is "understated" because it uses an old measuring method, labor attorney Kim Seong-hyun who represented the Song family told AFP.

A significant number of crews have been diagnosed with blood and [breast cancer](#) with many on sick leave, he said.

"Korean Air needs to be open about this issue and carry out a thorough investigation."

South Korea in June amended a law putting a ceiling on the number of international flights allowed for cabin [crew members](#) to minimize their exposure to [cosmic radiation](#), the Yonhap news agency reported at the time.

A study of more than 5,000 US-based flight attendants published in *Environmental Health* in 2018 found that flight crews have higher than average rates of certain cancers.

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