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STAR EXCLUSIVE

From cleaning robots to walk-thru disinfecting spray: How Pearson airport is planning for post-shutdown crowds

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Robots that clean surfaces. Fogging that cleanses departure waiting areas. Touchless entry points. A spray that disinfects as you leave.

Whether you're coming or going, your experience at Toronto Pearson International Airport is about to change in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that has grounded airlines around the world.

The Star has learned new details of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority's Healthy Airports initiative designed to give passengers more comfort post-pandemic and beyond, which the operator is set to unveil Tuesday.

The changes are not just about COVID-19, said GTAA president Deborah Flint. "It is going to be a forever future state, in the same way that security practices and risk-based approaches have become a given constant future state for the industry."

The initiative includes — of course — mandatory masks, more hand sanitizer and safe social distancing, practices that have been in place since the early days of the pandemic. But the changes go beyond that, to some things that are subtle and out of view, and others quite visible.

"This is obviously a very difficult situation, but it's also that opportunity to reinvent the travel experience and ultimately make it incredibly better, more nimble, more predictable and more reliable," Flint said.

The airport authority says it has partnered with industrial hygienists and artificial intelligence companies on its new policies. Some highlights:

- If you park, licence-plate recognition means you won't have to press a button to get a ticket. Drivers will also be able to use Apple Pay as a touchless option.
- If you take a cab, the GTAA is paying to install Plexiglas dividers [in more than 600 licensed airport taxis and limos](#).
- Only passengers will be allowed into the terminal, meaning tearful goodbyes need to be done beforehand.
- Ideally you've checked in online — which has long been an option — but now printing your baggage tag is also an option, meaning you can head straight to the bag-drop area.

- Your [temperature will have to be checked](#), and soon this will be done at a dedicated portal that's about a month away from being approved by the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority. Ideally, passengers will be going through temperature checks without even realizing that they're going through temperature checks, said Flint.
- Security checkpoints will be separated with Plexiglas (as will information kiosks) and you'll have the option of answering security and health-related questions on your smartphone before you advance. "The screening part is still a little bit challenging but we still have made it as safe as we possibly can for the passengers and the journey that they're on," said Dwayne Macintosh, Pearson's director of safety and security.
- Passengers will place their tickets under the security scanning device, not the screening officer.
- The bins where you put your laptop and other carry on items will be wiped clean after every use.
- Lines through U.S. Customs will be more spaced out.
- The departure holding areas have been reconfigured for social distancing. They'll be fogged with disinfectant between uses. Restaurants have also been reconfigured. "We're deploying people with machinery that can swath and fog very large areas," Flint said.
- Automated robotic cleaners will clean floors, letting staff work on more focused cleaning. "You'll see them moving around the floors of the terminals, and it's a very neat feature to see cleaning get to a new and higher standard," she said.
- Thermal imaging cameras throughout the airport will monitor that passengers are keeping a safe social distance.
- Employees, both of the airport and its tenants, will be monitored for health through a "COVID log" that makes contact tracing easier.
- Upon landing at Pearson from abroad, passengers will be asked to queue further "upstream" rather than massing at border control.
- And as a final farewell: After you pick up your luggage in Terminal One, you'll be asked to walk through a "disinfecting portal" that sprays you with a non-toxic saline-based solution.

Just as the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, changed how airports, airlines and their passengers viewed security, so too has the COVID-19 pandemic changed how the air industry views hygiene, Flint said.

"I always believe in never letting a good crisis go to waste," said Flint. "And so this provides an opportunity for us to fully reinvent all of some of the legacy problems and challenges that have existed in the passenger experience of the past."

Earlier this month, more than 100 leaders of the industry, including representatives of the GTAA, Air Canada, WestJet, Porter Airlines, travel agencies, tourism boards and airports across the country signed an open letter demanding Canada [be reopened to international and cross-provincial travel](#).

"We strongly believe that there are opportunities for a systematic consistent approach that provides the assurances of health travel, and we're very committed to the return of the industry," said Flint. "The job generation and economic generation is so important today."

Pre-pandemic, Pearson airport handled an average of 130,000 passengers a day — 150,000 if it was really busy. When the pandemic struck, the number dropped to a low of 3,000. It's crept back up to an average of 6,000.

"It's a very slow and gradual climb obviously nowhere near what we were before," said Flint. "But we are seeing people and their pent up demand or travel start to manifest itself in people getting on planes and boarding once again."



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