

Coronavirus Life: Tips for Travel and More After Getting Vaccinated Against COVID-19

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By Catherine Roberts/Consumer Reports

Americans who spent the past year or longer yearning to get back to their usual activities are now getting the chance. With COVID-19 infection rates trending down in many places in the U.S., restaurants, gyms, hotels, and other venues are reopening. In May, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that people who are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus—meaning at least two weeks past their final shot—can go unmasked and without social distancing in most situations, with little risk.

The vaccines don't guarantee you won't contract the virus, but research suggests that they provide near total protection against severe COVID-19. "Even if cases are occurring, they're now increasingly being decoupled from hospitalizations and deaths," said infectious disease specialist Amesh Adalja, MD, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security in Baltimore, at an Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) press briefing.

But plenty of people are not vaccinated, including younger children, who are not yet eligible. And while there's strong evidence that the few fully vaccinated people who do pick up the virus are unlikely to pass it on, more dangerous variants may continue to emerge.

For these reasons, it's important to continue taking some precautions to protect ourselves and others—notably, older adults, people with chronic medical issues, the immunocompromised, and those who can't be vaccinated—says James Dickerson, PhD, Consumer Reports' chief scientific officer. After all, "you can't distinguish fully vaccinated people who don't wear masks from unvaccinated people who don't wear masks," he says. To this end, the IDSA urges local officials to consider their area's transmission and vaccination rates when setting policies. And though many masking and distancing requirements have been relaxed, some federal, state, and local laws, as well as individual businesses' policies, may still call for these measures. So the new normal could look different, depending on where you are. It's also likely to continue changing.

Let's go!

Here medical experts cover the safest strategies for vaccinated and unvaccinated people in different situations. We're not fully back to normal yet, but we're well on the way. Following this expert advice could help us get there faster.

Planes, Trains & Automobiles

Travelers in the U.S. began dusting off their suitcases in April, when the CDC announced that fully vaccinated people can travel safely within the country. There's ample interest: In a Consumer Reports nationally representative survey (PDF) of 2,288 Americans conducted in April, 22 percent said a vacation was the social activity they missed most before full vaccination (or the most eagerly anticipated activity afterward).

The federal government still requires everyone 2 and older to wear a mask on planes, trains, and other public transportation. As of mid-May, destinations such as Hawaii and Chicago were asking that all visitors, or those from certain states, present a negative COVID-19 test. For unvaccinated domestic travelers, the CDC advises getting a COVID-19 test one to three days before travel and three to five days after, and self-quarantining for seven days after returning home. The agency also recommends that all travelers have a COVID-19 test three to five days after returning from a foreign country. And most airline passengers must have a negative test result no more than three days before traveling back to the U.S. or proof of COVID-19 recovery within the prior three months. (Rules and CDC guidance change often, so be sure to check before travel.)

Should You Or Shouldn't You?

"For anyone who's fully vaccinated, the risk of being on an aircraft, train, bus, or other mode of public transportation is low to very low," says infectious disease specialist W. David Hardy, MD, an adjunct clinical professor at the Keck School of Medicine at USC in Los Angeles. For unvaccinated travelers, he says, the risk is at least medium "because of the close seating arrangements and the fact that other unvaccinated passengers don't always wear their mask correctly."

Driving? "Of all the modes of travel, the most secure is in the cocooned environment of an automobile," says William Schaffner, MD, a professor of infectious diseases at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville. The risk in a taxi or another for-hire vehicle is also low for vaccinated and unvaccinated people if occupants are masked, passengers sit in back, and "windows are at least partially open, so fresh air can freely circulate," says infectious disease specialist Ravina Kullar, PharmD, IDSA spokesperson.

Smart Steps

Even if you're fully vaccinated, remove your mask only for eating and drinking—briefly and only if others are masked. "Other passengers are basically at the end of your nose," Hardy says.



"If they sneeze or cough while you have your mask off to eat, that's where an exposure could occur." Restrooms pose no heightened risk if you stay masked and wash your hands.

Be clear on cancellation and change policies. Airlines are reinstating some penalties waived earlier in the pandemic: If you bought the least costly tickets after certain dates on American, Delta, or United, for instance, you can no longer change or cancel them free of charge. Amtrak has waived change fees for reservations made by Sept. 6, 2021, but cancellation penalties may apply.

Many travel insurance policies now cover cancellations due to COVID-19 illness, says Meghan Walch, product manager at InsureMyTrip, a comparison website. "But standard coverage will not cover cancellations due to fear of COVID-19 or border closings." The Cancel for Any Reason protection in some policies has no exclusions but has eligibility requirements, can be pricey, and typically reimburses only 50 to 75 percent of costs. Note that rental cars may be scarce and expensive, so book ahead and check prices at off-airport locations. They might charge lower rates and have fewer fees.

Go Or Not? International Travel & Cruises

The current advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is that people put off international travel until fully vaccinated. "I've traveled internationally and think it's probably okay as long as you take precautions and have been fully vaccinated," says infectious disease specialist Maria L. Alcaide, MD. Infectious disease expert Ravina Kullar, PharmD, has a somewhat different view: "I would not recommend international travel until we see a consistent decrease in cases."

As for cruises from U.S. ports, the CDC projects that some could resume as early as mid-July. However, cruise lines will first need to meet several conditions, such as conducting test sailings or attesting that 98 percent of crew members and 95 percent of passengers are fully vaccinated. Will it be safe? "If a cruise line is requiring all passengers and crew to be fully vaccinated and test negative for COVID-19 before boarding, you'd be in a bubble and the risk would be low," Kullar says. But shore excursions could hike risks, so for now it may be best to wait to cruise.

Hotels & Home Rentals

If a hotel stay is in your future, it's a good idea to confirm that cleaning and ventilation measures to minimize COVID-19 transmission are in place. "Hotels have a high rate of individuals traveling from all parts of the world, so disinfecting is important to prevent even the remote chance of COVID-19 infection from surfaces," says Kullar at the IDSA. Barring local and state rules, many chains no longer require fully vaccinated guests to wear masks in indoor public areas such as elevators.

Should You Or Shouldn't You?

More than half of Americans in CR's survey—60 percent—said they'd be comfortable at a hotel where other guests might be unvaccinated. And experts say staying in a hotel room or home rental is a fairly safe bet for both vaccinated and unvaccinated travelers. "As long as the room has been properly cleaned and it has been 3 or 4 hours since the previous inhabitants were in the room, I would consider that low-risk," says Hardy at USC, adding that those hours should allow any floating viral particles to dissipate.

Smart Steps

Even if you're fully vaccinated, some experts, like Kullar, advise that you "continue to wear a mask and practice physical distancing in all public areas." She also recommends that you try to dine outdoors and at least 6 feet from other tables when at a hotel. When booking, remember that the liberal cancellation policies of earlier in the pandemic may have been lifted, that prepaid reservations might be ineligible for refunds under any circumstance, and that policies for hotels and home rental platforms such as Airbnb vary from property to property.