



Safely navigating through the COVID-19 crisis

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As the aviation industry struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic, pilots are looking at the European Union and its Member States to come up with strong, harmonised, and *mutually accepted* rules on how to operate safe flights with COVID present in our societies. As countries are gradually reopening their economies, passengers filling shops and train stations, the question about hygiene and virus transmission risk for travellers and their crew becomes increasingly important.

“The nature of air travel, linking two different countries, brings a challenge of mutual cooperation in a pandemic,” says ECA Secretary General Philip von Schöppenthau. “While each country can enact the most carefully designed mitigation measures for the disease, unless they are harmonised and mutually accepted by each country at either end of an air route, it is extremely difficult to link them together.”

“We also understand very well that people are wary of traveling during a pandemic,” says ECA President Jon Horne. “Whilst our long-term aim has to be the elimination of virus transmission in aviation, to confidently resume air travel as lockdown restrictions are eased, the immediate question is different. Do passengers face an increased risk when flying compared to going about their everyday life? If flying presents no more risk of transmission than shopping for groceries, going to work or school, or using other forms of transport, there is no safety benefit in avoiding it and flights should resume. This is an area where research and evidence will provide re-assurance for both air crew and passengers.”

While there is currently no extensive experience or accurate prediction model about the virus’ transmission risk on aeroplanes, European pilots favor a **precautionary approach**:

“**Social distancing on board** is difficult for a number of reasons but airlines can still decide to undertake measures as an improvement to passenger experience,” says ECA Secretary General Philip von Schöppenthau. “**Masks** are a rational measure for passengers, too. They have a role in reducing risk in everyday life, that doesn’t suddenly stop at the door of an aeroplane. Cheap, simple cloth masks and face coverings help prevent passing on infections to others, and can reduce the risk both for other passengers and crew.”

“Air crew working safely are also critical to enabling operations in the present situation. As pilots we can’t really do any social distancing in the flight deck. We inhabit a world of switches, touch points and shared seats and headsets. We operate away from home, rely on a workplace, food and accommodation prepared and shared by many people. Enhanced hygiene measures are therefore all we have to keep pilots safe,” says ECA President Jon Horne.

European Member States currently have a patchwork of different approaches, rules and health measures which are not harmonized and difficult to fit together. These hurdles can only be overcome by a coordinated approach, as other safety rules in aviation are coordinated. In particular states need to determine if incoming passengers have any greater risk of importing

COVID than the arrival state has of it being acquired in its own territory anyway. If this risk is no higher, arrival restrictions will achieve little. Having standardised, evidence based, measures applied and accepted by all will help achieve this. Rigorous and well-designed pre or post flight screening methods, passenger information, and common levels of disease prevalence and suppression between countries could all help mitigate risks until effective treatment or vaccines become available.

There is no doubt that an aircraft is a very safe space for passengers, with filtered and regularly replaced air. But the equipment that enables this must be fitted and serviceable, and cleaning and disinfection schedules mandated. To properly implement risk mitigations that support this, airlines need to ensure front line staff are trained, provided with personal protection equipment, and sufficient time and resources for cleaning and disinfection of the aircraft.

The pilot mentality is to always seek the safest possible solution. This case is no different and pilots are looking for the EU, its Member States and their scientific communities to guide us with sensible and harmonised measures to navigate air travel through this crisis safely.

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Note to editors: ECA is the representative body of European pilot associations, representing over 40.000 pilots from across Europe, striving for the highest levels of aviation safety and fostering social rights and quality employment for pilots in Europe. Website: www.eurocockpit.be & twitter [@eu_cockpit](https://twitter.com/eu_cockpit)