

ADVICE

Post-pandemic travel: Is it OK to ask another passenger's vaccine status or request they mask up?

Christopher Elliott Special to USA TODAY

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Masks are finally coming off on planes, trains, and cruise ships. But not all travelers are celebrating. Some are worried that it's happening too soon and that in a rush to remove face coverings, they could get sick -- or worse.

"Sitting next to an unvaccinated and unmasked person on a plane is terrifying," says Janice Lintz, a disability consultant from New York.

She cut back on travel during the pandemic. But now, with masking and social distancing rules loosening, she's reduced travel even more.

"How are the airlines going to keep passengers safe?" she wonders.

These are confusing times when it comes to passenger etiquette. Air travelers are worried about how they would respond to an unmasked fellow passenger. Would asking for that person's vaccination status or offering a mask provoke a confrontation?

Gerri Hether, a retired nurse from Mesa, Arizona, wants to avoid all of that. She says she'll continue to wear a mask and socially distance when she travels and she just wants to fly without any drama.

"Everyone should leave everyone else alone," she adds.

Not likely. So what do you do if you're seated next to someone on a plane who won't wear a mask, even when you are? Can you ask a fellow passenger to wear a face-covering even when the masking rules have been lifted? And how about social distancing?

"People around the world feel different levels of anxiety and fear around the current pandemic and changing regulations, requirements, and rules," explains Alyza Berman, founder of the Berman Center, an Atlanta addiction treatment center. "As you travel, mask policies and protocols may be optional. I believe that each person needs to respect each other's right to choose how COVID-safe they want to be."

How do you deal with the flashpoints of post-pandemic travel, like masks and social distancing? Here are some problems you'll likely face in your future travels. And we should acknowledge that there are two perspectives: that of a careful traveler who wants to continue masking and social distancing; and that of a traveler who doesn't feel the precautions are necessary any longer.

Is it OK to ask another passenger about their vaccination status?

If you're seated next to a stranger, it's probably a bad idea to ask about vaccination status. Remember all those mask confrontations we had on planes during the pandemic? You don't want a repeat of that.

If you suspect the person next to you is unvaccinated and possibly contagious, you have every right to move. And that should not offend your seatmate.

"Health and safety always trump etiquette," says Nick Leighton, etiquette expert and host "Were You Raised By Wolves?," a weekly etiquette podcast. "So it's important to never put your health or safety at risk for the sake of being polite."

Can I ask the person sitting next to me to wear a face covering?

Even if masks aren't required, you can still wear one. But no one can force your seatmate to mask up.

If you're the one not wearing the mask, here's a little etiquette tip: Give the mask-wearer some space.

"Mask wearing in situations where it isn't required is often the other person's way of saying that they still support social distancing guidelines," says Andrew Williams, an Ovation Travel Group travel advisor. "The important thing is to respect their individual opinions just as you wish them to respect yours."

His recommendation: If you see someone wearing a mask, give them six feet of social distance whenever possible, and avoid physical contact.

"It's none of your business if they refuse to wear a mask," says etiquette expert Rosalinda Oropeza Randall. "It's not your job to inform them of current CDC regulations. It is not your job to explain your position on face coverings. It is not your job to inquire why they are wearing it."

Am I allowed to ask for some space – as in, social distance?

Sure, say etiquette gurus. If there is space.

"If you want to distance yourself, by all means, distance yourself," says Adeodata Czink, who runs an etiquette consultancy called Business of Manners.

Most passengers or guests will give you some space if you want it. But that's not always possible, particularly if you're in an enclosed space, like a plane or ship.

"If another passenger asks me to take a step back, I will, just to make him comfortable. I won't make a big deal out of it," she says.

What if I'm stuck next to someone who isn't wearing a mask?

Carla Bevins, an assistant professor of business communication at Carnegie Mellon University, recommends finding common ground.

"Look to find something in common and start a dialogue," she recommends. "Be polite and discreet."

How do you do that? Respectfully tell your seatmate that their lack of a mask makes you uncomfortable, and ask them to mask up just for the flight. Carry extra masks with you so you can offer them one.

But if there's no mask requirement, you can't force anyone to comply with your wishes. Nor should you try, say etiquette experts.

"Your post-pandemic travel plans have to include an understanding of control," explains Jodi RR Smith, who runs Mannersmith Etiquette Consulting. "What you have control over and what you do not. If the behavior of others will potentially be too upsetting or outright dangerous to you, then it is up to you to adjust your plans."

What if my seatmate tells me to get lost?

Since masking and social distancing are such politically charged issues, a confrontation is almost inevitable. But no matter which side of this debate you're on, remember that you have choices when you travel. You don't have to let it escalate.

"So long as you are both following the mandates set by the airline or country you're traveling to, there's no need for confrontation," says Narendra Khatri, principal of Insubuy, a travel insurance company. "Respectfully try to remove yourself from the situation if you feel uncomfortable. As is always the case with an unruly traveler, request the assistance of an airline or airport representative before things escalate."

Traveling in this new post-pandemic world won't be easy, say experts.

"We are all learning how to navigate our world with people coming out of the pandemic with very different comfort levels, based on their feelings, health history and experiences," says Diane Gottsman, an etiquette expert who founded The Protocol School of Texas. "It's going to take some time, but we should do our best to hold our judgment and treat each other with kindness and understanding."