

BRUSSELS RECOMMENDS REMOVAL OF MANDATORY FACE MASKS POLICY ON AIRPLANES



The European Union is taking the first steps to ease the measures against Covid-19 in air transport. The EU Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) recommended last week to remove the requirement to wear face masks on airplanes.

This recommendation is based on the latest data on the evolution of the pandemic, in particular, the high levels of vaccination and naturally acquired immunity and the consequent lifting of restrictions against Covid in an increasing number of European countries.

In addition to the changes regarding masks, the EASA and ECDC recommendations include a relaxation of the strictest measures that still apply to airline operations. This recommendation **"will help ease the burden on the industry while maintaining adequate protection,"** they said in a statement.

"It is a relief for all of us that we are finally in a stage in the pandemic where we can begin to relax health security measures. For many passengers, and also for crew members, there is a strong desire for face masks to no longer be mandatory in air travel," said EASA Director Patrick Ky.

However, Ky has made it clear that "passengers should continue to comply with their airline's requirements and, where preventative measures are optional, make responsible decisions and respect the choice of other passengers."

"In particular, a passenger who is coughing and sneezing should seriously consider wearing a face mask, for the peace of mind of those seated nearby," he said.

ECDC Director, Andrea Ammon said that, even if their use is no longer mandatory, masks remain "one of the best methods to reduce transmission". Ammon insists that the rules and requirements of the states of departure and destination must be respected and applied consistently. In addition, airlines must inform passengers of any required measures.

The new recommendations on the use of face masks will take effect from May 16, 2022. However, the specific measures will continue to vary depending on the airline beyond that date. For example, flights to or from a destination where face masks are still mandatory on public transport should continue to encourage them according to the recommendations.

Vulnerable passengers should continue to wear a face mask regardless of the measures, ideally an FFP2/N95/KN95 type mask that offers a higher level of protection than a standard surgical mask.

Passengers are also encouraged to respect spacing measures in indoor areas, including at the airport, wherever possible. But airport operators should take a pragmatic approach in this regard: for example, **they should avoid imposing spacing requirements if they are very likely to lead to a bottleneck elsewhere in the passenger's journey.**

While many states no longer require passengers to submit data through a passenger locator form,

airlines must maintain their systems for collecting this information to make it available to public health authorities if necessary. For example, in case new and more dangerous variants appear.

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