



# The Safe Traveler Bulletin

Health information to guide Commonwealth travelers on how to prevent illness for themselves and communities while traveling.

## Welcome

We know travel looks a little different these days, but by staying informed and taking a few extra precautions, you can feel safer and more relaxed during your upcoming trip. Become a five-star traveler by reading on to learn more about how viruses such as influenza (flu), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19 can impact your travels.

## Flu Season: What it means for your travel plans

The Pennsylvania Department of Health monitors flu cases in each of the state's 67 counties. Although flu viruses can spread year-round, the "flu season" usually occurs in the fall and winter, typically peaking between December and February. The 2022-23 flu season has been unusual in that cases have seemingly peaked in November. To find out why, we spoke with Pennsylvania's Department of Health flu epidemiologist, Sameh Boktor, to discuss the current flu season and the public health implications for Pennsylvania residents.

### Why are we seeing more flu cases than we have in the past few years?

The measures we practiced to prevent COVID-19, like physical distancing, mask wearing, and handwashing, also protected us from the flu. This also made our immune systems vulnerable

since we hadn't been exposed to the flu virus for some time. As a community, we have stopped taking most of these prevention measures so our chances of catching a virus have gone up. The reason this flu season started earlier when compared with previous seasons is likely due to the same reasons.

### Does the flu vaccine protect against this year's strain?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that this year's version of the flu vaccine appears to be effective against the widely circulating strains of the virus. An effective flu vaccine is good at reducing hospitalizations from the flu. In October 2023, the CDC will release a vaccine effectiveness report that estimates the percentage of cases prevented and percentage of hospitalizations and deaths that were avoided due to the vaccine.

### How does this flu season compare to previous flu seasons?

We have seen more flu cases in this current season than the number of flu cases from the 5 previous flu seasons. Although flu activity decreased in December, flu activity can rebound and result in another wave of ill residents.

### How can I protect myself against the flu?

The CDC recommends everyone 6 months of age and older to get a flu vaccine every season. Vaccination to prevent flu is particularly important for people who are at high risk of serious complications from being sick from the influenza virus.

For more info on the flu visit [2022-23 Flu \(pa.gov\)](https://www.pa.gov)

## Travel Tips to Stay Healthy

- Stay up to date on COVID-19 vaccines, including an updated booster.
- Get your flu vaccine at least two weeks before travel.
- Wear a mask in indoor transportation settings.
- Practice good cough and sneeze etiquette by covering your mouth and nose with your tissue or your elbow.
- Delay travel on public transportation when you're sick.
- Wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub.



## What to know about RSV

You may have heard stories of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in the news. Read on to learn more about the virus and how it could impact your future travel plans.

RSV is a virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms. Its symptoms are most noticeable in the very young and very old. Because the virus infects the lower part of the lungs it can lead to concerning lung infections, such as pneumonia, and in some cases can result in hospitalization. It is most dangerous for children born prematurely, children under 6-months old, and those under 2 years old with chronic lung conditions or congenital heart disease. It also poses a risk for adults with chronic lung disease, congenital heart disease and weakened immune systems.

RSV is highly contagious. It's spread primarily through tiny droplets that contain the virus that come out of your mouth or nose when you cough and sneeze. It can also live on hands and soft surfaces, like tissues, for 30 minutes or more.

All of this means that RSV may be an unwanted passenger on the plane or train you're booked for on your next trip.

**There are ways to help prevent the spread of RSV when you travel.** Because there is not yet a vaccine for RSV and because you can be infected and sick with RSV and COVID or flu at the same time, prevention is key to keeping you healthy. Make it a priority to stay up-to-date with your flu and COVID-19 vaccine before you travel. If you or your child are sick or have a fever, sneezing or coughing, stay home and keep them home from daycare or school. If you must travel, wear a mask and physically distance yourself from others as much as possible. In addition, frequent hand washing, and surface cleaning are important measures for preventing transmission. Keep people who may be sick away from those most vulnerable to RSV, like premature infants, babies under two years old with certain underlying health conditions and the elderly.



### TRAVEL LIKE A PRO

A U.S. consular officer can help you find local medical care in a foreign country.

To contact the U.S. embassy or consulate in the country you are visiting, call Overseas Citizens Services:

If calling from the U.S. or Canada  
1-888-407-4747

If calling from other countries  
00-1-202-501-4444

You can also visit the websites of [U.S. Embassies, Consulate, and Diplomatic Missions](#) to find the contact info for the local U.S. Embassy of the country you are visiting. [www.usembassy.gov](http://www.usembassy.gov)

## International Travelers: U.S. travel requirements have changed for COVID-19

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has taken actions to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the United States during the recent increase in COVID-19. Starting on January 5, 2023, all air passengers two years and older will be required to get tested for COVID-19 no more than 2 days before their departure from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, or Macau, and show a negative test result to the airline upon departure.

**For more information:** [Order: Requirements for Negative Pre-Departure COVID-19 Test Result or Documentation of Recovery from COVID-19 for Aircraft Passengers Traveling to the United States from the People's Republic of China | Quarantine | CDC](#)

Also, the CDC is expanding the Traveler-based Genomic Surveillance program (TGS) to help with knowing if international travelers are carrying the COVID-19 virus. This voluntary program collects nasal swabs from returning international travelers (called pool sampling) using PCR testing. All positive swabs undergo gene sequencing and that data supports the early warning system of emerging variants of the virus. Currently, seven international airports in the U.S. are enrolled in the program.