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Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: advice for those returning from abroad

Avoiding infection during your journey home and preventive measures to take on your return

- **This updates the news of 1 May 2020**

Almost every country in the world has now reported cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) during the ongoing pandemic [1] and British travellers are now advised to postpone travel overseas indefinitely [2]. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advises British travellers to return to the UK whilst commercial flights are still available. However, closure of airspace and other travel restrictions have resulted in some British travellers struggling to return to the UK. Travellers should follow [updates and logistical advice from the GOV.UK website](#). The UK Government is working in partnership with some airlines to fly home British travellers stranded abroad during the COVID-19 crisis [2,3].

Returning travellers are advised to take precautions (see below) to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection to themselves and others during their journey home and to be aware of preventive measures that should be taken on their return to the UK.

Advice for travellers abroad

The [FCO foreign travel advice](#) provides information on individual countries travel restrictions during the COVID-19 crisis. For some countries, the foreign travel advice page may also contain information on options to return to the UK.

If you develop a high temperature, a new continuous cough or a loss of, or change in, your normal sense of taste or smell (anosmia) whilst abroad, you should check where to get help locally, follow the advice of local authorities and contact your travel insurance provider. To reduce the risk of passing on infection, you should not travel on an aircraft if you are unwell. Exit screening, which may include having your temperature taken and/or being asked about your health and travel history, may be implemented at exit ports of some countries and you may be denied boarding if you are symptomatic.

[Social distancing measures](#) are in place for all individuals here in the UK. These measures may be helpful in other countries reporting COVID-19 while you are waiting to return, but check local guidance also. Those who may be at greater risk of severe illness are advised to be particularly stringent with social distancing measures. Vulnerable groups include those aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions), individuals under 70 years of age with an underlying health condition (i.e. anyone instructed to get a flu jab as an adult each year on medical grounds) and pregnant women [4] Certain individuals who are thought to be extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 have been advised on more stringent 'shielding' measures to follow [4].

It is a personal decision whether to travel back to the UK. You should consider your individual circumstance and the range of information available to you, including the [travel advice](#) to decide what is right for you. If you are concerned about risks to your health, for example you are following

UK or local guidance to shield or self-isolate as you are [vulnerable or extremely vulnerable](#) to COVID-19, you may wish to seek professional health advice locally or from your usual doctor in the UK to discuss the best options to reduce your risk.

Aboard the aircraft

[The International Aircraft Transport Association \(IATA\)](#) state that the risk of contracting a viral infection through the air circulated aboard an aircraft is lower than in an office environment [5]; research has shown there is very little risk of any communicable disease being transmitted on board an aircraft [6]. Air quality is carefully controlled, changed very frequently and passed through filters efficient at removing viruses. Aircraft ventilation systems are active throughout the flight [6].

You should follow the advice provided by the airline bringing you home.

In addition:

- Avoid moving from your seat unnecessarily, but exercise your legs (flex and extend the ankles) as much as possible to encourage blood flow from the lower leg.
- Use the designated toilet for your area only and wash your hands before leaving the toilet.
- If you are unwell on the flight please stay in your seat and follow any instructions provided during the flight, and contact the air crew as soon as possible.

Precautions you should take to minimise the risk of infection include:

- Washing your hands regularly (or use a hand sanitizer containing 70% alcohol).
- Avoiding touching other people.
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Cough or sneeze into your bent elbow or a tissue, which should be disposed of immediately.
- Avoiding contact with anyone who is unwell.

Arrival in the UK and travelling home

The GOV.UK advice that applies to everyone is to go straight home from the airport, avoid public transport where possible and follow the [guidance on social distancing for everyone in the UK](#).

Guidance on isolation following return to your home

Because most parts of the world are now reporting COVID-19 cases and sustained human to human transmission in the community is occurring in the UK, guidance on self-isolation is now as follows:

- If you are well (no symptoms) you do not need to self-isolate on return from any country but you should follow the guidance on social distancing which applies to everyone in the UK.
- If you become unwell with recent onset of any of the following: a high temperature, new continuous cough or loss of, or change in, your normal sense of taste or smell (anosmia), you should self-isolate and follow the [Public Health England stay at home guidance](#).
- If you are [extremely vulnerable to COVID-19 you are advised to following the 'shielding' advice](#) from Public Health England.

If you are in the UK and you are self-isolating, do not contact NHS111 unless your symptoms worsen during home isolation or are no better after 7 days. If you have internet access contact [NHS 111 online](#), and if not call NHS 111. For a medical emergency dial 999. In Wales and Northern Ireland call NHS 111. In Scotland, phone your GP or NHS24 (111).

Advice for health professionals

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals present with a fever. In the returned traveller, some will have *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria, which can be fatal if not diagnosed and treated. All individuals being assessed for possible COVID-19 must be asked if they have **travelled abroad in the last six months**. If they visited a country where malaria occurs, they must have a blood test result for malaria on the same day [7].

Resources

- [COVID-19 \(coronavirus\): general advice for travellers](#)
- [Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\): Travel advice - coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [Public Health England - Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance](#)
- [UK transport and travel advice](#)

References

1. [World Health Organization. Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
2. [Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Press Release. FCO steps up plans to bring Britons stranded overseas. 4 April 2020 \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
3. [Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Return to the UK now if you're travelling abroad. Last updated 8 April 2020 \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
4. [NHS. People at higher risk from coronavirus \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
5. [International Aircraft Transport Association. COVID-19 Coronavirus & travellers \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
6. [World Health Organization. International travel and health. Transmission of communicable diseases on aircraft \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)
7. [Public Health England. Guidelines for malaria prevention in traveller from the UK 2019 \[Accessed 1 May 2020\]](#)