Airlines moving towards required pre-flight COVID testing to boost traveling

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to caution that even with masks, social distancing and other measures, travel still poses some risk, but health experts say testing could add another layer of protection.

Simply put, "I believe that we need to be integrating efficient and effective testing in large transportation systems," said Mara Aspinall, a biomedical diagnostics professor at Arizona State University and adviser to the Rockefeller Foundation.

Abraar Karan, a doctor at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, said testing could serve two purposes: reducing the risk of the virus spreading onboard planes and limiting infections between different communities. When the virus is spread widely across the country and the world, catching infected people leaving areas with higher rates of transmission could help slow it down.

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But Karan said there are trade-offs. False positives might keep passengers who could actually travel safely off planes. And perhaps most importantly, a single test is just a snapshot in time and won't detect people in the early stages of the illness. It may take up to 14 days after a person is exposed for symptoms to develop.

"Testing is certainly not a free pass," Karan said, emphasizing that quarantining remains the surest way of isolating people who might be infectious.

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