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Common - COVID-19 response and transport: ECDC and EASA' s Joint Guidelines and Recommendations for COVID-19 Testing and Quarantine of Air Travelers and challenges arising from the new SARS-CoV-2 variant

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【概要 : Summary】

The free movement of people within the EU is one of the fundamental principles of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. However, COVID-19 pandemic and the related lockdowns in the EU had and still have a detrimental impact in particular on the air passenger transport and tourism. In response to the first wave of COVID-19 in spring 2020, the EU/EEA countries and the UK implemented various public health measures to minimise the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission on-board of aircraft, as well as other means of transport.

Both, quarantine and testing, are measures to reducing the risk of importing and spreading the SARS-CoV-2 virus among travellers during transportation. In particular, in the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, air travel and tourism had led to a wide spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus within the EU/EEA and the UK, and consequently to a spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the individual Member State' s regulations and the European Commission' s package of guidelines and recommendations for reactivating the transport sector published on 13 May 2020, airlines and airports need to follow enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures to

ensure the best possible protection against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. However, the travel-related measures and national criteria to determine the potential need for testing and/or voluntary or mandatory quarantine of incoming travellers adopted by the EU/EEA countries and the UK have had a negative impact on citizens' rights to free movement and the functioning of the internal market.

On 2 December 2020, the European Centre for Disease Prevention & Control (ECDC) and European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), in collaboration with the Commission, published "The Guidelines for COVID-19 Testing and Quarantine of Air Travellers". The ECDC and EASA found that, based on the latest scientific evidence and information on the epidemiological situation in Europe until mid-November 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus was established in all EU/EEA countries and the UK. In this epidemiologic situation, the COVID-19 cases imported by travellers account for only a very small proportion of all detected COVID-19 cases. The findings confirmed that air travellers account for less than 1% of all detected COVID-19 cases. Therefore, travellers should be treated like the local population at the destination of

their trip, without direct exposure to COVID-19, unless there is evidence of the contrary. Consequently, the obligation of travellers to go into quarantine on entry into EU Member States was not anymore considered the right way to reduce the number of people infected with COVID-19 as the spread was taking place in the local communities more than due to air travel. However, these findings will have to be reviewed again due to the latest evolvement in the COVID-19 crisis and the appearance of a new, more infectious variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus. Meanwhile, the Commission has adopted a recommendation on EU coordinated approach to travel and transport in response to new variant of the of SARS-CoV-2 virus in the UK. However, since this new variant has already been detected in several other European countries, air travel is losing its importance as source of the virus spread and the containment of the new variant cannot be reached by just discontinuing air travel in Europe anymore.

【記事 : Article】

1. The EU's guidelines for reactivating the transport sector and the Aviation Health Safety Protocol of May 2020

The first cases of COVID-19 in Europe were imported from Hubei, China, probably at the beginning of 2020. After the nearly Europe-wide first lockdown in March and the cautious reopening as of April 2020, the European Commission proposed guidelines on how to relax the lockdown measures for the transport sector. On 13 May 2020, the European Commission presented a package of guidelines and recommendations to help the EU Member States to gradually lift travel restrictions and allow the transport sector and tourism to recover. The guidelines in the “Communication from the Commission Guidelines on the progressive restoration of transport services and connectivity - COVID-19” 2020/C 169/02 (C(2020) 3139 final) recommend measures for each

individual mode of transport and call for coordination among Member States in light of the gradual re-establishment of connections between them. Restoring the freedom of movement for citizens in the EU and lifting internal border controls and strict quarantine rules was also a necessary precondition to restore tourism in the EU in the summer. In collaboration with the Commission, the ECDC and EASA developed protocols for the measures at the airports, airlines and operators in order to ensure a safe return to normal flight operations. Airlines and airports need to follow enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures and guidance to ensure the best possible protection against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

On 30 June 2020, EASA published its second issue of the “COVID-19 aviation health safety protocol. Operational guidelines for the management of air passengers and aviation personnel in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.” The COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocol (AHSP) and guidelines address the entire journey from the passenger's perspective, at the departure airport, on board of the aircraft and at arrival in order to setting up measures to protect public health. Regarding the quality of air on-board of aircraft, most aircraft have high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters installed, which sterilise the air. Besides the European Commission's guidelines, the individual EU Member States and the UK continuously introduced individual measures in the transport sector to confine the further spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

2. The EASA and ECDC guidelines on testing and quarantine of air travellers

2.1. Background

In order to limit the importation of COVID-19 by cross-border travel within the EU, many EU Schengen Countries closed their borders also to the neighbouring EU Member States in the first wave of the pandemic. In air travel, besides the

COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocol (AHSP) at EU level, many EU Member States introduced different, non-harmonised sets of individual rules to contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which led to significant restrictions of travels in the EU. Many EU/EEA countries and the UK have adopted quarantine as a measure for incoming travellers, assuming that some of these travellers could spread the disease. An approach used by several countries is to combine quarantine with the testing of incoming travellers in order to reduce quarantine duration. According to data provided by 30 countries in the EU/EEA and the UK until 16 October 2020, 12 countries (40%) require 14-day quarantine or a combination with testing at one, five or seven days after arrival for travellers from certain countries. Five out of 30 countries require 10 days quarantine and/or testing after arrival; one Member State recommends a seven-day quarantine and testing before release and one requires two tests 48 hours apart. The lack of harmonisation and frequent, sometimes sudden, changes in national policies are causing confusion among travellers and have a deterrent effect on air travel and travel in general.

On 13 October 2020, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation 2020/1475 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to avoid fragmentation and disruption, and to increase harmonisation, transparency and predictability for citizens and businesses. On 28 October 2020, the European Commission issued a Communication on additional COVID-19 response measures (COM(2020) 687 final), mandating EASA and ECDC to work on guidelines on testing in air travel, which could be used by public health authorities, airlines and airports to help the safe arrival of passengers, among others.

2.2. The ECDC/EASA guidelines for COVID-19 testing and quarantine of air travellers

On 2 December 2020, the EASA and ECDC jointly

published their “Guidelines for COVID-19 Testing and Quarantine of Air Travellers. Addendum to the COVID-19 Aviation Health Safety Protocol”. The guidelines are intended for the use by the decision-makers in the EU/EEA Member States. The Guidelines contain recommendations regarding the testing and quarantine for air travellers and aim at supporting the EU Member States in determining a coordinated approach to reduce the risks related to the movement of people within the EU/EEA countries and the UK in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health and safety protocol determines that, in the current epidemiological situation, quarantine or systematic testing for COVID of air travellers is not recommended, according to ECDC/EASA. Instead, a basket of preventive measures including testing and tracing has been found being the best strategy to minimise the possibility of transmission during the air travel process.

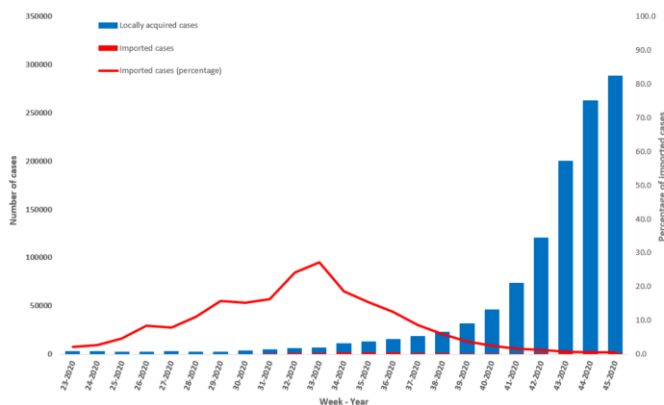
2.3. The role of air travellers in the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus

According to the ECDC/EASA, in a situation in the destination country, in which the SARS-CoV-2 virus is already spreading in the local community, imported cases from air travel are likely to have a rather insignificant impact on the further spread of the virus. ECDC/EASA underline that in air travel, documented cases of SARS-CoV-2 transmission in aircraft mainly occurred before the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions, like the wearing of facemasks.

Figure 1 shows that an increase of imported cases in the EU/EEA and the UK was observed during weeks 31-34, representing a relatively important proportion of imported cases during the summer holidays, when the total number of COVID-19 cases was low. However, as testing policies focused on testing travellers during the summer holidays, this proportion might also be biased. Instead, the proportion of imported cases decreased in subsequent weeks and until week 45 (last week

with available data), when SARS-CoV-2 was established in all EU/EEA countries and the UK and was spreading significantly in local communities. At this point in time, when the vast majority of COVID-19 cases is locally acquired, imported cases only account for less than 1% of the total number of cases. In contrast to the situation, in which a country has a close to zero number of infections with COVID-19, in a situation in which the SARS-CoV-2 virus is spreading in the local communities, entry screening, quarantine and border closures for incoming travellers are unlikely to prevent the introduction of SARS-CoV-2 into a community. Therefore, at the current point of the pandemic in Europe, air passengers should not be considered as a high-risk population.

it may detract public health resources and laboratory capacity from more essential public health activities. Accordingly, air travellers could be considered as a mostly non-symptomatic subpopulation with a low probability of being infected with COVID-19, unless there is evidence of the contrary. The primary scenario in which a testing and quarantine regime could be useful, according to the ECDC/EASA Guidelines, is when travellers move from an area of extremely high incidence - well beyond the lowest “red” threshold of 50 cases per 100,000 on a 14-day basis - to another “red” zone with a much lower infection rate or to any “orange” or “green” zone. The recommendations evaluate different testing/quarantine strategies to adopt in this case, laying out the options for countries to allow them to manage the residual risk of infection being imported. According to the Director of ECDC Andrea Ammon, “testing of incoming travellers would be an effective measure if countries achieved sustained control of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.



*Source: TESSy, ECDC. Country reports from Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Norway, and Slovakia. Data were included from countries that had a) $\geq 70\%$ completeness of TESSy data, when compared with data retrieved by ECDC epidemic intelligence for the said period (weeks 23 to 45), and b) maximum 35% of missing data in relation to imported cases.

Fig. 1: Locally acquired and imported cases of COVID-19, as reported by the destination country for eight EU/EEA countries*, weeks 23-45/2020

Source: EASA/ECDC:

https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Guidelines_for_COVID-19_testing_and_quarantine_of_air_travellers-12-2020.pdf, p. 6

Therefore, the ECDC/EASA recommendations highlight that in such a situation, the implementation of systematic testing for SARS-CoV-2 of air travellers is not recommended, except in specific epidemiological scenarios, as

Furthermore, when a country decides to implement quarantine on entry, the country should provide adequately equipped quarantine facilities for travellers that have no possibility of home quarantine. Countries should also explore options for quarantine monitoring measures, such as daily health checks, or follow-up calls, according to their national capacities. Decreasing the duration of quarantine could, in theory, facilitate compliance. Moreover, the ECDC/EASA document recommends the EU Member States to harmonise their approach and further presents specific operational recommendations for the management of travel-related measures to aid in this process. This reflected the epidemiological situation in Europe by mid to end of November 2020. Depending on the evolution of the pandemic and future evidence and developments, in terms of risk assessment criteria, testing technologies or the introduction of vaccines, the ECDC/EASA

already foresaw the necessity of an update of the Guidelines. This could soon become necessary, due to the appearance of a new SARS-CoV-2 variant, which became evident by mid-December 2020.

3. The EU's recommendation (C(2020) 9607 final) on the new SARS-CoV-2 variant

The increasingly dynamic COVID-19 pandemic in Europe worsened due the appearance of the new variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus. The first evidence of the new variant was based on an analysis of a viral genome sequence in the UK. This new variant is significantly more transmissible, with an estimated increased transmissibility of up to 70%. This has led again to the introduction of stricter measures to confine the free movement of people within Europe and beyond.

In response to the appearance of the new variant, on 19 December 2020, the UK government announced tougher restrictions for large parts of South East England, including advice that people should not travel into or out of those areas, and should not travel abroad. Meanwhile, cases with the new variant have also been reported by Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. It is likely that the variant is already circulating also in other EU Member States and beyond. Due to the appearance of the new variant, some EU Member States closed the transport connections to the UK and disruptions occurred in passenger and freight transport between the EU and the UK.

On 22 December 2020, the European Commission adopted a Recommendation on a coordinated approach to travel and transport in response to the SARS-CoV-2 variant observed in the UK (C(2020) 9607 final). The Commission underlined that in the specific context of this situation between the EU and the UK, it is important to take temporary precautionary action to limit the further spread of the new virus strain. However, while all non-essential travel to and from the UK should be discouraged, essential travel and transit of passengers and the movement of goods

needs to be facilitated. The restrictions need to be coordinated and provide for the necessary exemptions for citizens and residents returning home and other essential travellers. Rapid antigen tests for transport workers should be made possible in order to avoid further freight transport disruptions. Flight and train bans should be discontinued, given the need to ensure essential travel and avoid supply chain disruptions.

In line with Council Recommendation 2020/1475, some groups of EU citizens and third-country nationals should be exempted from further temporary restriction, provided that they undergo a RT-PCR test, among others. The connectivity for essential travel, including the return home of nationals and residents, should be upheld while respecting the relevant precautionary measures. Cargo flows also need to continue uninterrupted, in accordance with the Green Lanes and the Air Cargo Communication, not least to ensure the timely distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, for example. Transport staff including truck and train drivers, inland waterways crews and aircrew should be exempted from any travel ban across any border. Similarly, travel and transit of seafarers should be facilitated. Transport staff and seafarers should be exempted from testing and quarantine requirements when they are travelling across a border to and from a vessel, vehicle, or aircraft, although they should respect the general protection and distancing measures that are applied locally.

Until the end of the transition period provided for in Article 126 of the Agreement on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union on 31 December 2020, Member States should continue applying the principles and mechanisms set out in Council Recommendation 2020/1475 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/1475 of 13 October 2020),

when adopting measures restricting free movement from the UK to the EU.

In particular, all Member States should implement points 19 to 21 of Recommendation 2020/1475 concerning the common framework on possible measures for travellers coming from higher-risk areas. Any new measures taken by the Member States in view of the United Kingdom should state explicitly that they expire at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. As of 1 January 2021, the UK will become a third country and Member States shall start applying the Recommendation 2020/912 on the temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the EU to persons travelling from the UK of 30 June 2020. Accordingly, in principle only essential travel may take place from the UK. In order to benefit from an exemption from this general travel restriction, the Council would need to decide to add the UK to the list of third countries whose residents should not be affected by temporary external borders restriction on non-essential travel to the EU. The Commission also expects the public health authorities and laboratories of the EU Member States to increase sequencing efforts and analyse virus isolates in a timely manner to swiftly identify cases of the new variant.

4. Conclusion

While until December 2020, the majority of EU/EEA countries and the UK were experiencing a widespread transmission of COVID-19, the appearance of the new strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus has again worsened the situation. Before the appearance of the new virus variant, the relative significance of air travel for the virus being spread was considered minimal compared to ongoing transmission in local communities within several EU Member States. The prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infections in travellers was estimated <1 and therefore lower than the prevalence in the general population or among contacts of confirmed cases within an EU Member

State. Therefore, ECDC/EASA concluded in their guidelines that travellers should not be considered as a high-risk population nor treated as contacts of COVID-19 cases, in countries where the SARS-CoV-2 virus is spreading in the local population, unless they had been in known contact with a confirmed positive case. Since mid-December 2020, with the appearance of the new virus strain, this situation has again fundamentally changed.

While following new Recommendations published by EASA and ECDC and before this outbreak of the new SARS-CoV-2 variant in the UK, European and international aviation associations urged the European governments to immediately abolish quarantine measures and other travel restrictions, now, new temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to and from the UK are introduced. The European Commission's new Recommendation on the EU coordinated approach to travel and transport in response to the new variant of coronavirus in the UK (C(2020) 9607 final) should help to avoid any further disruption for essential travel, including the returning home of nationals and residents to the EU from the UK as well as cargo flows, in accordance with the Green Lanes and the Air Cargo Communication (C/2020/1897).

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