

KansasCity.com

Posted on Fri, Nov. 21, 2003

Have bug, will travel

The wary can detour germs

By TONI WOOD Special to The Star

Over the river and through the woods, on crowded airplanes and buses, in and out of public restrooms, we go.

And the cold and flu viruses go along, too.

But this holiday season, perhaps more than ever, travelers are more wary, more careful of those unseen germs and bacteria.

Look for travel-size hand sanitizers tucked into purses, or anti-bacterial towelettes used to wipe off armrests and restroom doorknobs. Notice flight attendants wearing disposable gloves to pick up trash. In this post-SARS world, you might even see passengers wearing face masks. Or handing them out to others.

The busiest, most compressed travel season of the year starts Wednesday. An estimated 36 million people will take to the skies, roads and rails.

On a typical day, about 26,000 people fly in and out of Kansas City International Airport. But on Wednesday that number is expected to climb to 29,000, peaking at 33,000 the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

"The tone and the whole feel is different," said KCI spokesman Joe McBride. "People are more casually dressed and they're acting more casually, with a lot more hugs and kisses, reunions and send-offs."

And because it's the holidays, travelers will be less willing to cancel their trips, even if they're coming down with the flu.

"People just continue on their journey, or they minimize their symptoms," said Ronald Primas, medical director for Travelers' Wellness Center in New York. "They don't want to disappoint their families, or they tend to book way in advance, so they had to pay a lot for seats and they don't want to lose the money."



KEITH MYERS/The Kansas City Star

Flight attendants Monica Tucker (right), Stephanie Conder (left) and Stacey Angelone replaced pillows on Wednesday as they cleaned up a Southwest Airlines plane at Kansas City International Airport.

So as people cough and sneeze their way through the holidays, they're also sharing those contagious germs with everyone around them.

"During this time of year, the holiday season and winter months, there's a fairly significant percentage of people who are going to have colds, influenza, or bronchitis, either in the early stages or late stages," said Stephen Scherer, medical director of the Travel and Immunization Clinic in Overland Park.

"Those viruses are spread by coughing and sneezing," he said, "and the secretions and droplets are so small that you don't see them."

Whether you're on a plane, a subway or in a car, you can get sick sitting next to someone who is ill.

"The difference on an airplane is your contact time," Primas said. "If you're sitting next to someone for four hours, it increases the risk." Flight attendants, well aware of the contagious illnesses they're exposed to, now use disposable gloves to take trash from passengers. They're handed drinking cups, used tissues and dirty diapers.

On Southwest Airlines, for example, attendants go through the cabins between flights, picking up trash and refolding blankets. A separate crew restocks drinks and snacks and wipes down lavatories.

Generally at night, a different crew does a deeper cleaning, which includes disinfecting trays, disinfecting restrooms, and replacing pillowcases and blankets. Just to be safe, flight attendants say, bring your own small pillow or blanket.

Travelers on all modes of transportation can fight viruses with several other steps as well. Get a flu shot, health experts recommend, and wash your hands many times a day. Carry bottled water, and keep plenty of physical distance from others who are ill.

Flu shots are especially necessary for people 65 years and older or for anyone who has a chronic disease such as diabetes, asthma or lung disease.

"It's not too late," said Scherer. "It is preferable to have it completed by mid- or late November. But even in January, it's better to get it than not at all."

Unanimously, experts also recommend that travelers wash their hands regularly and religiously. Philip M. Tierno Jr., director of microbiology at New York University Medical Center, says that 80 percent of all infectious diseases are transmitted by contact, either by people touching each other or a surface that someone else has touched.

People say they wash their hands often. But really, they just don't.

TRAVELIN' TIME

This Thanksgiving holiday, an estimated 26 million Americans will take to the skies, the roads or the rails to see their loved ones. Total holiday travel is expected to be up 2.4 percent from last year.

Total people traveling (in millions)



'98 '99 '00 '01 '02 '03
* Estimated

In the Air
Nationwide, 4.6 million people will fly this week. KCRW will have 20,000 travelers on Wednesday and 30,000 on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

On the Road
Nationwide, 21.1 million people—which accounts for 86 percent of the holiday travelers—will make their Thanksgiving trip the year by vehicle.

Ball & Bus
Amtrak is expecting to serve more than 540,000 holiday travelers. Greyhound expects to run its buses at full capacity.

—AP/WIDEWORLD, THE SEATTLE TIMES

WEATHER OUTLOOK

Wed., Nov. 26 High 46°

Partly sunny

Thanksgiving High 48°

Mostly sunny

Fri., Nov. 28 High 57°

Sunny

Sat., Nov. 29 High 38°

Mostly sunny

Sun., Nov. 30 High 30°

Mostly sunny

—KANSAS CITY WEATHER REPORT, AMERICAN METEOROLOGICAL SOCIETY

Experts frequently cite a 2000 study by the American Society for Microbiology. The group asked Americans in five cities if they washed their hands after using a public toilet, and they were also observed in restrooms.

The result: 92 percent of men claimed they did wash their hands; 58 percent actually did. Among women, 97 percent claimed they washed their hands; 75 percent actually did.

"You just can't wash your hands too often," said Scherer. "Also, there are hand- sanitizing towelettes and hand-sanitizing gels that are becoming increasingly popular."

In crowded places, he said, try not to touch your face with your hands, because viruses enter your body through the nose, the eyes or the mouth.

Keep your distance from loved ones who are ill, not to mention the general public, said John Verstraete, who practices internal medicine with the Plaza Physicians Group.

"If someone in your family has the sniffles, you want to say, 'I've missed you. I love you. But I'm not going to kiss you,' " he said. "Babies are the ones that are most kissable, but as a parent you should try to dissuade your family from that. Tell them, 'No kissing on the face.' "

Drinking plenty of bottled water keeps you well-hydrated, a good tactic for fighting illness and jet lag. Diana Fairechild, a former flight attendant and now an advocate for healthier conditions on airplanes, recommends eight to 16 ounces of water for every hour you're in transit.

Airline passengers can carry large cotton handkerchiefs that they moisten with their bottled water, then drape across their noses and mouths as they fly, she said. The handkerchief will protect them from germs, and the moisture will help counter the airline's dry, recirculated air.

Fairechild, whose book *Jet Smarter* outlines the perils of cabin air, occasionally offers a face mask to co-passengers who are obviously ill.

"It's a very optional suggestion. It's a self-protective measure," she said. "Of course I don't give them my own handkerchief. I just carry a few inexpensive painters' masks and at least that stops the spray of spitters and sneezers.

"People are very conscious of peer pressure and they are very compliant that way. People are fine about it. They apologize. They just hadn't thought of it."

Although the SARS scare is virtually history, more people wear masks in public places.

"I would say that if you're sick, you're doing everyone a favor by putting one on," Verstraete said.

So when should you stay home? Fever is one guideline.

"I usually draw the line at 100.5 degrees," Verstraete said. "Anything above that, you probably shouldn't be traveling. You should be home in bed getting rest."

For people traveling by plane, keep in mind that the pressure in a cabin can damage eardrums, especially if you're congested.

"If you're unable to breathe through your nose, at least one nostril, then you should bypass the flight,"

Verstraete said.

As for those nonrefundable plane tickets, cancel your reservation before the departure time, then ask the airline for options. American Airlines, for example, helps travelers reschedule within a year from the date of their original ticket. If a doctor verifies your illness with a faxed note, Midwest Airlines will change your flight date and waive the fee.

People who travel by Amtrak train can receive a refund, and the \$30 cancel fee is waived if a doctor verifies the illness. Greyhound customers can still travel within 60 days of purchasing a one-way ticket, or within a year of buying a round-trip ticket.

The Star's Mike Rice contributed to this report.

Traveling safely

*Check out tips from the experts about how to stay healthy during the holidays. **Story, E-1***

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