

Coronavirus outbreak

Airline industry may lose up to \$157b to virus: Iata

Impact on air travel at same level as fallout of global economic crisis, says Iata economist

Lim Yan Liang

Airlines stand to lose as much as US\$113 billion (S\$157 billion) in revenue this year after a dramatic increase in coronavirus cases worldwide over the past week, the group that represents global carriers said yesterday.

This would put the impact of the Covid-19 infections on air travel at the same level as the fallout of the global economic crisis in 2009, International Air Transport Association (Iata) chief economist Brian Pearce told reporters.

A fortnight ago, Iata forecast that the global aviation sector stood to lose some US\$29 billion in revenue as a result of the coronavirus.

But the virus' fast spread beyond the Asia-Pacific in recent days prompted Iata to update its assessment to a loss of between US\$63 billion and US\$113 billion.

Speaking at the close of a two-day industry workshop at the Mandarin Orchard hotel, Mr Pearce said the impact of Covid-19 was already "considerably worse" for carriers than the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak in 2003.

One reason is that the Chinese travel market is about four times the size it was back in 2003, so

Asia-Pacific airlines can expect to see a much bigger hit to their bottom lines.

"If the virus had been limited to Chinese markets, (then) the impact of airlines in other regions, we thought, would be relatively minor," he said.

"But clearly, what we have seen in the last week is a dramatic increase in outbreaks in regions outside of the Asia-Pacific, particularly in Europe, which means that this is now a global situation."

The coronavirus has also adversely affected passenger confidence, with even bookings to countries with very few cases having slumped, noted Mr Pearce.

If countries that today have only a handful of cases see a surge in infections, revenue loss could hit the worst-case scenario, mirroring industry losses last experienced in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.

Airline industry revenue was US\$483 billion in 2009, compared to US\$564 billion in 2008. The figure bounced back to US\$545 billion in 2010.

Any recovery could also be delayed. While in the past, disease outbreaks such as Sars and the avian flu saw cases peak within three months and passenger numbers re-



GLOBAL SITUATION

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IATA CHIEF ECONOMIST BRIAN PEARCE

cover within six months, the delayed effect of Covid-19 outbreaks means this fast, "V-shaped" recovery could be dragged out, he added.

While acknowledging that people have become afraid to fly, Iata officials yesterday stressed that air travel remained very safe despite the virus situation.

They noted that commercial aircraft are equipped with Hepa (high efficiency particulate air) filters that remove at least 99.97 per cent of airborne particles, the same level of filtration that can be found in hospitals.

Iata medical adviser David Powell said: "To date, there is no real evidence of transmission from one passenger to another passenger despite the fact that we know there have been instances where people have flown and travelled even when already sick with a fever."

Agreeing, University of Toronto infectious diseases expert Isaac Bogoch said that the odds of catching the virus on a plane were "extremely small", and the risk could be mitigated further by practising good hand hygiene, such as frequent washing with soap and good coughing etiquette.

Among the 140 attendees at the workshop, which saw participants discuss best practices to combat the virus and ways to handle its impact, was Senior Minister of State for Health Lam Pin Min.

Dr Lam said that should a global pandemic come to pass, every country imposing travel restrictions on everyone else would be "a non-option that would hurt us all".

Governments, airlines, the health and civil aviation authorities need to start laying the groundwork so that necessary measures to mitigate the virus' spread can be put in place while allowing life to go on, he wrote on Facebook.

"I am glad that at a time when many international meetings are cancelled, Iata decided to hold this workshop in Singapore," he said. "It is a mark of confidence in what Singapore has done to help contain the outbreak and carry on with life."

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Window seat cuts risk of catching virus on airplanes: Experts

Toh Ting Wei

Air travel during the coronavirus outbreak can be made safer with a few basic precautions – and taking a window seat helps.

Experts say precautions can range from basic actions like keeping one's hands clean to flagging unwell passengers. But the key would be for an ill person to be socially responsible and not travel, and for airlines to prevent those who are ill from boarding, they said.

In an interview with The Straits Times yesterday, the International Air Transport Association's (Iata) medical adviser David Powell said: "The respiratory spread of this organism requires generally close contact, and actually most of these cases we have seen have been from household contact and hospital-type contact rather than casual contact."

"So any risk of (infection) is from contact with those close to you."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said that when infected persons cough or sneeze, they spray small droplets from their nose or mouth which could then be breathed in by nearby individuals.

It recommends keeping a distance of at least 1m from someone who is coughing or sneezing, but this might not be possible on a plane.

Dr Wong Sin Yew from the Infectious Diseases Specialists Group said that in case a passenger notices someone unwell in close proximity, it is better to alert the cabin crew so that the person can be given surgical masks.

Infectious diseases expert Paul Tambyah from the National University Hospital had said that transmission can also take place through indirect contact even if a person is sitting far away.

For example, when an infected person goes to an airplane toilet, he would touch the toilet handle and could leave viral particles there. Passengers who subsequently use the toilet would touch the handle as well, and this could expose them to the risk of infection.

Thus, hand hygiene is an important precaution for travellers, given that they could come into contact with the virus left behind by an infected person.

This could work even in a normal influenza season, experts said.

Iata's Dr Powell said: "Try to learn not to touch your face, not to touch other people and think of a new greeting other than a handshake, because it's touch that's a very important mode of spreading."

Travellers should wash and sanitise their hands often, he said. Those coughing and sneezing should at least do so into their sleeve or a tissue and then clean their hands afterwards.

Those who want additional reassurance can also wipe surfaces around their seat with a disinfecting wipe, or even opt for a window seat.

According to a study of 10 transcontinental United States flights by the FlyHealthy Research Team from 2018, window seat passengers have far fewer close encounters on a plane than people in aisle and middle seats, which thus lowers their risk of getting an infectious disease.

"Our simulations using these data... indicate that a droplet-mediated respiratory infectious disease is unlikely to be directly transmitted beyond 1m from the infectious passenger," said the researchers.

"Thus, transmission is limited to one row in front of or behind an infectious passenger."

"Our simulations also indicate that an infectious flight attendant

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you ask. we answer.

can generate several infections; thus, it is imperative that flight attendants not fly when they are ill."

The longer the flight, the more the movements of those on board and the more chances of close contact, the team noted.

Airlines are taking their own precautions.

Singapore Airlines and Scoot said they both have surgical masks on the plane for passengers who are unwell.

In addition, crew also have to take their temperature before flights.

One issue that is not a problem is the air quality on planes.

Their filtration systems can weed out most viruses, experts said.

Iata's Dr Powell said the high-efficiency particulate air (Hepa) filter on modern planes can remove about 99.97 per cent of airborne microbes, including virus and bacteria. Cabin air is refreshed every two or three minutes with this filter.

"Furthermore, the cabin air system delivers approximately 50 per cent outside air and 50 per cent filtered, recirculated air. This means the supplied air is essentially sterile," said Dr Powell.

Experts said the risk on a plane is actually quite small, especially for those who are not sitting close to an infected passenger.

The FlyHealthy Research Team noted that most contact on board was very brief.

University of Toronto infectious diseases expert Isaac Bogoch said: "Anytime we have lots of people congregating in a small place, there is the potential for something to happen, but that potential is extremely small, and that risk is extremely small."

This risk could be further mitigated by practising hand hygiene, he added.

Iata's Dr Powell insisted that travellers do not necessarily face extra risk of transmission now.

"Yes, it's still safe to fly and remains so, really, the risk is no different from before the outbreak," he said.

"To date, there's no real evidence of transmission from one passenger to another passenger, despite the fact that we know there have been instances where people have flown and travelled even when already sick with a fever."

Ultimately, the key is to prevent unwell passengers from boarding.

The Infectious Diseases Specialists Group's Dr Wong said: "It's an issue of social responsibility – if you are ill, then you shouldn't fly... The focus should be also on airlines to ensure that anyone who is sick should not be allowed to board the aircraft."

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Visitors at Changi Airport's Terminal 2 last month. One reason the Covid-19 outbreak is projected to have a bigger impact than Sars on airlines is that the Chinese travel market is about four times the size it was back in 2003, so Asia-Pacific airlines can expect to see a much bigger hit to their bottom lines. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



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Coronavirus lingers in rooms and toilets but disinfectants kill it: Study

WASHINGTON • New research from Singapore's National Centre for Infectious Diseases and DSO National Laboratories has found that patients with the coronavirus extensively contaminate their bedrooms and bathrooms, underscoring the need to routinely clean high-touch surfaces, basins and toilet bowls.

The virus was however killed by twice-a-day cleaning of surfaces and daily cleaning of floors with a

commonly used disinfectant – suggesting that current decontamination measures are sufficient as long as people adhere to them.

The research was published on Wednesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association and comes after cases in China where the pathogen spread extensively through hospitals, infecting dozens of healthcare workers and other patients. This led scientists to believe that, beyond catching

the infection through coughing, environmental contamination was an important factor in the disease's transmission, but its extent was unclear.

The Singapore researchers looked at cases of three patients who were held in isolation rooms between late January and early February. They collected samples from their rooms on five days over a two-week period.

The room of one patient was sampled before routine cleaning, while

the rooms of the other two patients were sampled after disinfection measures.

The patient whose room was sampled before cleaning had the mildest symptoms of the three, experiencing only a cough.

The other two had moderate symptoms: both had coughing and fever, one experienced shortness of breath and the other was coughing up mucus.

Despite this disparity, the patient

whose room was sampled before cleaning contaminated 13 of 15 room sites tested, including a chair, the bed rail, a glass window, the floor and light switches.

Three of the five toilet sites were also contaminated, including the sink, door handle and toilet bowl – more evidence that stool can be a route of transmission.

Air samples tested negative, but swabs taken from air exhaust outlets were positive – which suggests

that virus-laden droplets may be carried by air flows and deposited on vents.

The two rooms that were tested after cleaning had no positive results.

The results, the authors wrote, "suggests the environment as a potential medium of transmission and supports the need for strict adherence to environmental and hand hygiene."

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