

Advice for Pamlico Residents: Traveling Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic



This article provides guidance about traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic to help you keep safe and to ensure you have an enjoyable trip. This is not intended to discourage you from travel; it is meant to provide you with valuable information and increase your awareness of the unique circumstances surrounding travel during this Pandemic . The key points are:

- Be aware of the state of the pandemic where you plan to travel, including case trends, testing, and community spread.
- Take extra precautions such as getting tested and quarantining before travel, particularly if you or those you will be visiting have risk factors for COVID-19.
- Be especially diligent in practicing the 3 W's. Travel increases your exposure to more people and high touch, potentially contaminated, surfaces.
- Before you go, be aware of the mandates and regulations in the state or country to which you are traveling. Restrictions regarding COVID test status or exposure may impact your plans.
- If you are flying or taking a train, you need to understand any rules imposed by the carrier and in terminals during travel. You should also seriously examine the risks associated with air or train travel in the context of your own health, and balance that with the importance of your travel.
- Healthcare considerations BEFORE you travel include whether hospital care is readily available, and assuring you have adequate medical insurance (including medivac coverage if you are travelling internationally). You should also bring an extra supply of your medication in case you become stranded for an extended period.
- Preparation is key to setting expectations and making it an enjoyable experience.
- You can take measures to make travel as safe as possible!

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we have all had to adjust and react to requirements and changes placed upon our daily lives. One of those disruptions has been travel. This article explores some of the considerations of whether to travel and how to remain safe when you choose to do so.

Before you travel

The first thing to consider is whether to travel at all. Since you will be in an environment that you have less control over, your risk of exposure increases, along with the potential for you to transmit the disease to others if you are infected. Consider your personal health as well as the health of those around you.

You should inform yourself about what the situation is where you plan to travel:

- Is the rate of infection higher than where you live?
- Are safety measures mandated?
- Is there hospital capacity available should you need to seek treatment?
- What type of medical care is available?

In the US, each state's Department of Health is the best source of information about COVID-19 in that state. In North Carolina, our information is at www.ncdhhs.gov. Outside the US, beginning with the country's main website is a good starting point, and often tourism sites provide useful links and recommendations. You can also find individual state and country level infection rate information at the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>. Travel specific guidance is available from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html>. The CDC is an excellent resource covering general travel guidance, best practices, and specific state and country information you should be aware of before traveling.

Once you know what to expect, ask yourself "can I enjoy myself on this trip"? If you cannot do that, is it worth the expense and the effort? If museums, parks, and attractions are closed, or if you will have to quarantine for a portion of the trip, will you be disappointed? As always, having the right expectations will make any trip more enjoyable.

The Washington Post has developed a helpful interactive tool that guides travelers through a series of questions and provides guidance depending on who you are traveling with, how you are traveling, where you are staying and the purpose of your trip. It is available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/travel/holiday-travel-flights-hotel-tips/>

Visiting family vs. vacationing

Traveling to visit family or traveling for leisure/vacation may require different preparations. When visiting family, you will likely be near them for long periods of time, perhaps longer than anyone outside your household since the pandemic began. Thus, you should consider extra measures of safety.

- If you or your family have underlying health conditions, you should seriously consider whether to take the trip.
- You should consider getting a COVID-19 test and self-quarantining until the result is available before departing. Your family members should consider the same.
- Without testing, consider taking the step of self-quarantine for 14 days before departing. This is something you should assess depending on your family's tolerance for risk, and the potential severity of the risk for each of you.

Traveling for a family visit or for vacation - the mode of travel is important. Though traveling by car generally presents less risk of exposure than traveling by air or train, it often requires stops for fuel and rest breaks where you could come in contact with other people and high touch, contaminated surfaces. Traveling by train or air will put you in prolonged close contact with people outside of your household, as well as exposure to high touch surfaces while in lines to clear security, boarding, and during transport. Social distancing is not usually possible and exposure time is prolonged.

Once you arrive at your destination, the main difference between family visits and vacation may be that you are more likely to be staying in a hotel, and going to attractions or entertainment when you are on vacation - which means you will probably be in closer contact with strangers and crowds. You will probably be eating out more than at home. All these situations and activities increase your risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Once you arrive at your destination, you can mitigate increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 by:

- Choosing outdoor activities (including dining outside) rather than indoor ones
- Wearing a face covering indoors, and outdoors when in groups
- Washing and sanitizing hands frequently
- Standing at least 6 feet apart whenever possible

Where are you going?

Within the US, if you plan to cross state lines, you need to be aware of the requirements and restrictions in that state. Guidelines and regulations for wearing masks and the number of people that may gather could differ from North Carolina, and some states and localities may impose legal penalties for failure to comply.

Some states and localities, predominantly in the Northeast, currently require visitors from certain states to self-quarantine for 14 days upon arrival or be able to provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test in the past 72 hours. North Carolina is currently on the list of restricted states. Be aware of how COVID-19 is spreading in our state and how that impacts where you may be traveling.

To understand the requirements, you can contact people who live there or search for “COVID-19 travel advisory for XXX” - the state you plan visit. Here is an example from New York:

<https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/covid-19-travel-advisory>.

For International travel, the bar rises even further. Since you will be traveling by air, you need to prepare being in areas with many other people and waiting in lines to board and going through immigration at your destination. You may be on a full plane, and you will need to get to your hotel or other accommodations once you arrive – **all while wearing a mask**. Carry a hand sanitizer or wipes to clean high-touch surfaces, and your hands frequently.

Almost all countries have requirements that visitors show evidence of a negative COVID-19 (PCR type) taken 72 hours before boarding their flight, and fill out a pre-travel form requesting authorization to travel. In most cases, without these documents, you will not be able to board the plane. Many destinations have additional requirements above these basic ones including:

- A test upon arrival and quarantine until a negative result is returned
- Isolation at the resort during your stay

- Additional testing and reporting of health conditions during your stay
- Other requirements as defined by the individual destination

Each country is constantly updating its protocols, so expect the requirements to change, sometimes rapidly, and be prepared to adapt. Remember that you are a guest and are subject to their rules and regulations. Once again, a search for “COVID-19 travel advisory for XXX” for the country you plan to travel to will help you find the most current regulations.

What about health care at my destination?

You never expect to need to see a doctor while traveling, but things happen. Before you travel, check what your medical and/or travel insurance will cover if you are out of your home state or overseas. You should ensure that COVID-19 care is covered. Some countries specifically require proof that your policy covers COVID-19 treatment. When traveling to another country, also confirm they have quality hospital care, including intensive care facilities if needed. Medivac insurance is a must if you are traveling to other countries, so if urgently required, you can be transported to a facility with the quality of care you need, or even returned to the US, with a medical provider accompanying you.

Because of the uncertainty, changing conditions and regulations, you may want to consider purchasing travel insurance, and be careful to read the conditions for which the policy will reimburse you. Even if you do not normally purchase travel insurance, COVID-19 may place unique challenges on your travel plans. What if your pre-travel COVID-19 test comes back positive? You do not want to be worried about losing deposits or airfare for the trip you had planned!

Where can I get a COVID-19 test?

In Pamlico County, testing is available at the Pamlico County Health Department, Pamlico Community Health Center, CCHC Pamlico Medical Center, and CVS in Grantsboro. Your doctor’s office may also be able to administer a test as well.

Conclusion

Travel during the COVID-19 pandemic takes preparation and understanding the risks. Seeing family and friends or simply having an enjoyable break can be helpful for our physical and mental health, so it is important to know how to travel while minimizing risk. COVID-19 places additional, and in some cases, required restrictions on our plans. Being informed about the state of the pandemic where you are going, COVID-19 public health mandates, available healthcare services, and knowledge of your own health or those you are visiting will help you stay safe and plan an enjoyable trip. Making COVID preparedness a part of your routine trip planning process will help reduce the stress while traveling, minimize COVID-19 risks during travel and throughout your stay, as well as during your return trip home. COVID- preparedness planning will keep you as safe as possible while visiting family or vacationing over the holidays.



COVID-19 COMMUNITY TASK FORCE

The COVID-19 Community Task Force (CCTF) is a volunteer organization established to engage the community in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic and to support and augment the County's efforts. The information shared by the CCTF is not an official communication from Pamlico County, its Health Department or the Pamlico County COVID19 Task Force.