

ICAO CAPSCA

COVID-19 AVIATION SCIENTIFIC ASSESSMENT GROUP (CASAG)

OMICRON VARIANT KNOWN, UNKNOWN AND RECOMMENDATIONS

12 February 2022

The CASAG met on four separate occasions during December, January and February to consider if the emergence of the Omicron Variant of the COVID-19 Virus would necessitate any modifications to the existing Cross Border Risk Management guidance developed by CAPSCA. In particular, the group focussed on whether any changes might be needed to the multilayered risk management process. This document summarizes what the CASAG group knows and does not know about the Omicron Variant. In addition, based upon what the group knows about the Omicron Variant, several recommendations are made to adjust testing strategies in the Conclusions and Recommendations section.

Given the dynamic nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the CASAG will continuously monitor the situation and provide updates when evidence and peer reviewed literature becomes available. Please note that there **is a high likelihood that future Variants of Concern may arise before we reach a situation where the disease has less impact and becomes more manageable.**

What we know:

1. It is unlikely that undetected translocation of the Omicron Variant by travellers would significantly increase the overall risk within a State that already has widespread circulation of the variant (2, 7, 16).
2. Transmission of the Omicron Variant is occurring much more rapidly than earlier variants even in those individuals that are vaccinated (14, 21, 25). Based upon the limited evidence to date, it appears that the incubation period for the Omicron Variant is shorter on average than for earlier variants (4, 11, 23).
3. While the effectiveness of vaccines against infection and transmission of Omicron is reduced compared to other variants, they provide strong protection against severe disease, hospitalization and death. Protection is enhanced with a booster dose (10, 17, 18).
4. At the time of publication, most States are presumed to have widespread circulation of the Omicron Variant (19, 24).
5. PCR tests continue to detect Omicron.
6. The public health and social measures such as proper use of face masks, enhanced respiratory and general hygiene, and physical distancing reduce the risk of transmission of all SARS-CoV-2 variants, together with good ventilation of indoors settings (8, 9).

What we do not know:

1. The risk of transmission of the Omicron Variant compared to other variants during each stage of the travel journey.
2. The optimum testing strategies for vaccinated and unvaccinated travellers, and what criteria could be used to remove testing requirements.

3. Whether the performance of any test is significantly different when testing for the Omicron Variant. The sensitivity of the Ag-RDT in detecting Omicron is still under investigation.
4. The risk of infected vaccinated people passing the Omicron Virus to others. There is limited information on this risk but there is some evidence that a vaccinated person will be less likely pass the virus on to others.
5. The duration of protection from vaccines or prior infection.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Considering the lessons learned from the COVID-19 Delta Variant and the emergence of the Omicron Variant, **CASAG reiterates the importance of implementing an effective multi-layered risk management strategy as outlined in the ICAO Cross Border Risk Management Manual (Doc 10152)**. Emphasis should be placed on vaccinations, masking, and testing.

Based upon the evidence available as of the publication of this document concerning the emergence of the Omicron Variant, CASAG recommends that States consider the following in adjusting their existing COVID-19 testing strategies:

- ✓ Pre-departure testing has limited capability to reduce the risk of translocation given that travel may be during the incubation period.
- ✓ Depending on the epidemiological situation at the origin and destination, States may consider post-arrival testing in conjunction with self-isolation or quarantine, pending the results of the tests, as a strategy to mitigate the risk of translocation.
- ✓ Pre-departure testing may still be considered an effective layer of a risk mitigation strategy for flight associated transmission of COVID-19. Tests should be done as close to departure time as possible. Antigen testing may be more appropriate as it can identify currently infectious travelers, provides results quickly and is less expensive.

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