

Is flying safe during COVID-19? Here's the scant bit of scientific evidence Transport Canada is relying on

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Canada's medical officers of health have repeatedly stressed the importance of physical distancing to reduce the possibility of [COVID-19](#) transmission.

But step on an airplane in Canada and suddenly social-distancing rules, not to mention limits on how many people you should be around at a given time, no longer apply.

So what's the basis for Transport Canada's decision-making? The Star has found that Canada's air travel regulator is relying on scant peer-reviewed scientific evidence regarding the spread of COVID-19 on airplanes in its decision not to mandate social distancing on commercial flights.

When asked for the scientific evidence guiding its recommendations to airlines, Transport Canada initially provided none, saying only that safety measures are "based on the best available science and evidence."

When pressed by the Star for that evidence, the agency provided just one peer-reviewed study looking at an outbreak of COVID-19 that affected 16 passengers on a flight from Singapore to Hangzhou, China, in late January. The [study concluded](#) that one passenger may have become infected on the flight.

Transport Canada also provided a link to a [letter to the editor](#) published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal describing a flight from China to Toronto on Jan. 22 in which no cases of in-flight COVID-19 transmission were found despite the presence of a passenger who was symptomatic on the airplane and later tested positive for the virus.

The agency cited just one other report in a [document](#) published by the International Air Transport Association, a trade organization representing some 290 airlines around the world, describing a March flight from the United States to Taiwan with 12 symptomatic passengers on board. The report said no secondary cases in the 328 other passengers and crew were detected.

Transport Canada's guidelines to the Canadian aviation industry, created with input from the Public Health Agency of Canada, recommend but do not require airline operators to "optimize social distancing."

"However, in cases where distancing is not possible or practical, other protective measures against COVID-19 are in place as part of the multi-layered approach to support in reducing the risk of COVID-19," said Transport Canada spokesperson Sau Sau Liu in an email. The measures include mandatory masks, hand-washing, limiting food services and increased use of air filtration systems on aircraft, Liu said.