

WestJet spokesperson Morgan Bell told the Star in an email the decisions the airline makes are “data-driven or evidence-based” and pointed to several publications, including the same Canadian Medical Association Journal report cited by Transport Canada, and a statement by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control that said the risk of getting infected with COVID-19 on an aircraft “cannot be excluded but is currently considered to be low for an individual traveller.”

She also pointed to a [study](#) published after the 2002 SARS outbreak looking at the transmission of infectious diseases during commercial air travel that concluded the environmental system used on planes “seems to restrict the spread of airborne pathogens, and the perceived risk is greater than the actual risk.” That same study also concluded, however, that “commercial airlines are a suitable environment for the spread of pathogens carried by passengers or crew.”

Bell said the airline is a “highly safety sensitive organization in one of the most carefully regulated industries in the world.”

Since July 21, there have been 14 domestic flights and 23 international flights arriving or leaving Canada carrying passengers with confirmed cases of COVID-19, according to the federal government.

New Democrat MP Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway) has been a vocal critic of the Justin Trudeau Liberals for not ordering airlines to follow physical distancing rules. He is calling for a federal relief package to ensure carriers are not filling middle seats for economic reasons.

“Is it possible to practise physical distancing on aircraft? ... The answer is yes. So the airlines are violating direct concrete, consistent advice being given by public health officials,” Davies told the Star. “They’re effectively subordinating public safety to the economics.”

Air Canada and WestJet dispute such assertions, saying passenger safety is of the utmost importance.

“Safety and profitability are not opposed but instead mutually reinforcing, as safety is always the customer’s first consideration in choosing an airline and a strong safety record is essential to long-term success,” said Air Canada’s Fitzpatrick.

Bell said WestJet has “safely flown more than 415,000 guests on 13,700 flights with no reported cases of transmissions on board our aircraft since March 24, when the pandemic began to ramp up in Canada,” noting that because of a downturn in demand, the company is still facilitating spacing on all aircraft when capacity allows.

While the limited amount of peer-reviewed research on the spread of COVID-19 in aircraft seems to suggest a low risk of transmission, epidemiologists and infectious disease experts say the dearth of such research is part of the problem.

Craig Jenne, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Calgary, points out that most of the studies and reports being relied upon by airlines were done early on in the pandemic.

“What’s happened since?” he said, noting that studies published today would likely have been conducted in March or April “where if we looked in Canada or even the U.S., the prevalence of the virus in the community was still extremely low ... The