

Everything Travelers Need to Know About the REAL ID Act

(Courtesy of Caroline Teel, Shannon McMahon, and Jamie Ditaranto, SmarterTravel)

Are your days of flying domestically using only your driver's license numbered? They could be, if you don't have a new type of license. As the deadline for the [REAL ID Act](#) looms, it's vital for you to know if your current driver's licenses doesn't meet the new criteria.

If you've been procrastinating getting a REAL ID, there's some good news—the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) just announced that the REAL ID Act will not be enforced until May 7, 2025, postponing the deadline from May 2023.

[Real ID Documents Can Now Be Submitted Online](#)

Here's a quick and easy primer with everything you need to know about the REAL ID Act, about when to use a REAL ID vs. a passport, and about the Department of Homeland Security's hard deadline on the changes.

What Is the REAL ID Act?

The REAL ID Act “set standards for the issuance of sources of identification, such as driver's licenses,” says the DHS. This Act applies to state-issued driver's licenses and identification cards, and prohibits certain federal agencies from accepting IDs that do not meet the new standards.

This means that when the REAL ID ACT is in place, only driver's licenses issued under REAL ID standards will be accepted at airports.

REAL ID Changes Timeline: When to Worry About Invalid IDs for Flying

In 2005, the REAL ID Act established nationwide requirements for state IDs as a post-9/11 security measure. States had well over a decade to make the changes, but the deadline to complete the transition has been extended multiple times. Some states struggled to make the switch to issuing the new, compliant licenses; having trouble finding the budget for the new licenses, or lacking other logistical means to enact the changes.

May 7, 2025: According to the DHS website, by this date “every air traveler will need a REAL ID-compliant license, or another acceptable form of identification, for domestic air travel” as well as to enter federal government buildings. If by this date your state license is not a REAL ID compatible one, you will need to bring another form of ID to the airport, like a passport.

How Do I Get a REAL ID?

The process for getting your REAL ID is a little more difficult than the last time you renewed your license: You'll probably have to visit a DMV and provide paperwork, like proof of residency and proof of lawful presence in the United States. You can, however, submit this paperwork (which you'll still need to bring with you) [online ahead of time for approval](#): Check your state's DMV requirements online for more information.

If you're a non-citizen or you think getting your ID might be more complicated for any other reason, check [the Department of Homeland Security's DHS REAL ID FAQ page](#) for more information on your particular case.

REAL ID vs. Passports

If you're unable to obtain a REAL ID by May 7, 2025, you'll need to bring a passport or another [TSA-acceptable document](#) with you to the airport in order to pass through security. The DHS reminded travelers often of the looming deadline, in part because if everyone rushes to get a REAL ID at once, there could be long wait times in many states.

Does a REAL ID Replace a Passport?

The short answer: no. You'll need a REAL ID at minimum for domestic travel come May 2025, and your passport *can* work in place of a REAL ID for domestic travel—but a valid passport will still be required for international travel. So whether you have a REAL ID or not, a passport will always get you through airport security. And whether you have a REAL ID or not, a passport will always be required for international travel.