

What is a vaccine passport – and where do I get one?

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Two months from today, the UK government says, international leisure travel may be possible once more – 19 weeks after it was made illegal during the current lockdown.

Simultaneously, foreign governments have been setting out their plans for admitting visitors according to vaccination status, and several cruise lines have also said they will need proof of vaccination before allowing passengers to travel with them.

These are the key questions on what we know so far.

What is a vaccine passport?

The term is slightly misleading – it's not a passport, and can include more than vaccination details. It is more properly a "Covid health certificate" that includes proof that a person has been vaccinated, or the results of tests for people who have yet to get a vaccine, or information about a person having had Covid-19 and recovered.

Some travelers are more equal than others, because vaccination, testing or recovery means that they have a lower risk of transmitting Covid-19, but they need a document that proves it.

A Covid health certificate should provide a simple yet secure system that can help travellers navigate through a tangle of restrictions as smoothly as possible while protecting privacy.

Any such document is likely to include the name and date of birth of the traveler, the date of vaccinations and the type and batch used, or details about a recent test or recovery.

How do I get one?

You can't. In the absence of international agreement on such a document, a range of participants – airlines, nations, the European Union – are coming up with options of their own.

It is a difficult task. Transport operators and destination countries will want to know the status of the traveller but giving unfettered access to health databases around the world raises very serious privacy concerns.

Is that what Europe is doing?

Yes. Plans for a [Digital Green Certificate](#) have been revealed by the [European Commission](#). It is the most forward-thinking proposal so far, and its characteristics may well be emulated worldwide.

The document will be either digital or, despite the name, on paper. "Both will have a QR code that contains essential information, as well as a digital seal [or signature] to make sure the certificate is authentic," says the EU. Health authorities in each country will issue the certificate and store a traveller's data securely (this corresponds to the [NHS](#) record of vaccinations, for example).

The European Commission is building a gateway so that all certificate signatures can be verified across the EU. Crucially, the personal data encoded in the certificate does not pass through the gateway.

Vaccination certificates will be issued to recipients of any Covid-19 vaccine, but for travel purposes, only “vaccines which received EU marketing authorisation” must be recognised by other EU governments.

“Only the validity and authenticity of the certificate is checked by verifying who issued and signed it,” says the commission.

All health data remains with the member state that issued the Digital Green Certificate.

The Commission says it is working with the World Health Organisation to ensure that certificates issued in the EU are recognised in other countries.

When will these certificates be available?

The European Parliament and EU member states are expected to rubber-stamp the proposal, but the European Commission is vague on timing – saying only that it hopes the digital infrastructure will be ready by “summer”.

What is happening in the UK?

It is difficult to say. The UK government recognised in November last year that some kind of vaccination passport would be needed. The first Global Travel Taskforce report identified the need for “a global framework for validating test results and vaccination records”.

The report noted: “The global harmonisation of measures will simplify travel between countries, strengthening public confidence in international travel, and enable travel to be more quickly re-established between countries.”

But the “[roadmap to recovery](#)” issued three months later does not take us much further.

“Once more is known about the [effect] of vaccines on transmission and their efficacy against new variants, the government can look to introduce a system to allow vaccinated individuals to travel more freely internationally,” it says.

“The UK is working with other countries who have started similar programmes, to lead global efforts to adopt a clear international framework with standards that provide consistency for passengers and industry alike.”

Meanwhile the 25 million-plus British adults who have had at least one vaccination have not been given documentation that is likely to support international travel.

How do I prove my status in the meantime?

It’s tricky. The standard NHS Digital App – not the Covid-19 App – should contain details of your coronavirus vaccinations, but without key details: the vaccine type and the batch number.

“Ask your doctor for a letter,” is the chorus from UK ministers and the travel industry.

What else is out there?

CommonPass, a collaboration between The Commons Project (a Swiss not-for-profit builder of digital platforms for communities), the World Economic Forum and others, is actually being used in real life – though on a very small scale.

Passengers on JetBlue flying from Boston to Aruba who take the mandatory Covid test from one of the airline's recognised providers can have their details shared with the associated Common Trust Network – and don't even need a special app. They simply have their passports scanned on arrival, and the database will inform the authorities on the Caribbean island that they have been tested.

Such a system is akin to Esta, the online permission needed to enter the US. If you are properly registered and accredited, then the airline will be given a green light just by swiping the "machine-readable code" in your regular passport.

CommonPass invites travelers to "Share your current health status so you can safely return to travel and life". The proposition is: "CommonPass delivers a simple yes/no answer as to whether the individual meets the current entry criteria, but the underlying health information stays in the individual's control."

Any other airline developments?

The most prominent proposal is one being promoted by many airlines: an app-based system known as the Travel Pass, being developed by the [International Air Transport Association](#) (IATA).

It works with IATA's existing "Timatic" database which is used by airlines worldwide to determine whether passengers are suitably certified to travel – usually in terms of assessing their compliance with visa or passport validity rules.

The Travel Pass helps passengers find accurate information on testing and vaccine requirements for their journey. It also provides details on testing centres. But the Travel Pass will also allow health authorities, laboratories and test centres to send test results or vaccination certificates to passengers in a format that is secure.

Singapore Airlines is the world's first airline to pilot the Travel Pass mobile app for digital health verification, for passengers travelling from Singapore to London Heathrow until 28 March 2021. But the Travel Pass as it stands will not on its own provide sufficient proof of a negative test to comply with UK border rules.

The airline says: "They will also need to bring a physical copy of their health certificate that is issued by the clinic where they took their Covid-19 test."

There are dozens more, from standalone airline apps such as Ryanair to a multiplicity of possible solutions – which may be hampering progress towards standardisation worldwide.

They include AOKpass (working with Etihad between Abu Dhabi and Paris) and VeriFLY (being trialed by [British Airways](#) on routes from London to the US).