

# The Washington Post

## **The travel industry is taking precaution, but is it calming anxiety about disease?**

By [Christopher Elliott](#) Columnist November 6

The deadly Ebola virus has arrived in the United States just in time for the holiday travel season, carrying fear and uncertainty with it. A survey late last month by Unicom, an organizer of trade shows and conferences, found that 41 percent of active travelers said the outbreak had raised their anxiety levels.

Travel companies say they're taking every precaution they can to keep their passengers safe.

After Carnival Cruise Lines learned that a passenger on its ship Magic might have handled specimens taken from the first Ebola patient diagnosed in the United States, the ship skipped a port of call in Mexico and headed back to Galveston, Tex. The health-care worker, who showed no Ebola symptoms, voluntarily isolated herself onboard at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's request.

Frontier Airlines, which had an Ebola scare after nurse Amber Vinson flew from Cleveland to Dallas right before testing positive for the virus, exceeded the steps recommended by the CDC. The company reportedly said it put the six-person flight crew on a 21-day paid leave and cleaned the aircraft four times, including removing the seat covers and carpets in the immediate vicinity of Vinson's seat.

But that doesn't completely reassure frequent traveler Eunice Park Choi, an attorney from San Francisco: She worries that Frontier's rigid cancellation policies might have played a role in Vinson's decision to take the flight even though she wasn't feeling well. "I would like the airlines and cruise lines to step up and say: 'If you think you have Ebola, don't use your ticket and we will honor it later with no fees,'" she says.

Indeed, Frontier and Carnival's published rules are clear and haven't changed, even for people who fear they might have picked up an infectious disease: Passengers who think they might be sick and decide to stay home without notifying the carrier lose the entire value of their trip. That's an industry standard. If they notify the company before departure, they might receive a ticket credit or a partial refund, depending on their travel date.

If a passenger is actually diagnosed with Ebola, Frontier would do the "right thing" and refund his or her ticket, so "as not to create an additional burden on the family during a difficult time," says Todd Lehmacher, an airline spokesman.

That policy doesn't necessarily extend to other contagious diseases, he adds. "The diagnosis of other infectious diseases would be evaluated on a case-by-case basis dependent on the specific situation and the doctor's advice for travel," he says.

Carnival said it would waive its refund rules under certain Ebola-related conditions. "If someone is denied boarding because they have traveled to one of the countries of concern in West Africa within the past 21 days or have had contact with someone with Ebola in the past 21 days, they will be provided a full refund plus reimbursement of travel expenses," says Carnival spokeswoman Aly Bello.

For the most part, the travel industry appears to be in “wait and see” mode, at least for now. American Airlines, the largest carrier in the United States, hasn’t changed its policy for infected passengers. If the customer, immediate family member or traveling companion can’t travel because of an illness, the ticketed flights for travel must be canceled before departure to have the value of the ticket applied to future travel. “All penalties, rules/restrictions apply for new travel,” its policy says.

American isn’t changing the way it cleans aircraft, either, according to company spokesman Joshua Freed. There is no need to. “Our aircraft cleaning already follows CDC guidelines, including those specific to Ebola and other communicable diseases,” he says.

Travel companies are taking “adequate precautions,” says Robert Wheeler, the chief medical officer for On Call International, a Salem, N.H., company that offers medical evacuation protection services to travelers. But he cautions that as the situation changes, companies may need to adapt.

Choi’s question exposes an ongoing conflict that may come to a head if Ebola spreads. Whether you’re staying at a hotel, cruising, flying or taking a train, you have few options when you wake up the morning of your trip with symptoms of an infectious disease. Chances are, you’ll lose some or all of the cost of your vacation or business trip.

Travel companies imposed these restrictions for two reasons: first, they protect their profits; and second, they ensure all customers are treated evenhandedly, a policy otherwise referred to as “no waivers, no favors.” Many customers know about these strict no-refund rules, and that has them concerned. They fear someone with Ebola symptoms would fly or cruise rather than lose the value of their ticket.

But what about passengers who aren't sick but are just worried that they could get the virus from another passenger, crew member or infected site? They are left in a difficult spot.

Len Peg, a retired teacher from Calgary, has already paid for his Caribbean cruise in February. To get a full refund, he'll have to cancel by next month. Otherwise, he'll slowly lose his vacation over time, first with his deposit, then a quarter of the value, then half, and finally everything.

"I plan to watch the news to see how contained the outbreak is," he says. "If it looks like the numbers are climbing, we'll cancel the cruise. If it looks like the numbers have stabilized, we'll go." Peg's reaction is typical: In the Unicomm survey, 7 in 10 travelers said they wouldn't change their itineraries in the near term.

Others aren't taking any chances. The Institute for Shipboard Education, which runs the study-abroad program Semester at Sea, decided to skip several ports of call in Senegal and Ghana during 2015, thanks to the Ebola outbreak. "We've decided to reroute and replace those port visits with alternative ports," says spokeswoman Lauren Judge.

Blake Fleetwood, a manager at CookTravel.net, a travel agency in New York, just saw the cancellation of a \$197,000 booking — a family of 30 planning an upscale safari to South Africa. There have been no reported Ebola cases in that country. Yet they are adamant.

"The client doesn't even want his \$60,000 deposit back," he says.

I admit, I've postponed a planned trip to Dallas with my family this month. But many other travelers, particularly those with business, say they're not

changing their plans. Joyce Gioia, an author and motivational speaker based in Austin, has six trips on her calendar for the rest of the year.

“I’m playing the odds, and the odds of exposure at this point in time are very low,” she says.

That may be true. But unless Ebola is contained quickly, it seems the travel industry’s cancellation rules, which themselves are slow to change, could collide with an infected customer’s aversion to losing a ticket credit. This may be the right time for the government to take a more active role to ensure Ebola isn’t spread by travel via air, land or sea because of shortsighted corporate policies.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/the-travel-industry-is-taking-precaution-but-is-it-calming-anxiety-about-disease/2014/11/06/65612ad2-58a3-11e4-b812-38518ae74c67\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/the-travel-industry-is-taking-precaution-but-is-it-calming-anxiety-about-disease/2014/11/06/65612ad2-58a3-11e4-b812-38518ae74c67_story.html)

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