

NEW HEALTH PROTOCOLS FOR THE AIRPORT SECTOR IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

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Series
COVID-19

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The crisis caused by the covid-19 pandemic continues to hit various sectors of the economy relentlessly. In Brazil, the domestic air market has been reduced by 90%, while the international market remains practically shut down, according to data released by the National Civil Aviation Agency (Anac).^[1]

A series of regulatory measures have already been implemented by Anac with the aim of providing financial breathing space for airlines and making some operational rules more flexible, in an attempt to guarantee minimum survival conditions for the sector during this period of extreme reduction in demand. Rules on reimbursement of tickets, transport of cargo in the passenger cabin, deadline for meeting consumer demands, and notice period for cancellations and rebookings were promulgated. However, thus far there has been no concrete position on issues of a health nature.

The gap in the guidelines involving official prevention measures was filled on May 19, with the publication of health measures for aviation. They are based on a technical note prepared by the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), which brings in a series of recommendations for airport operators, workers, civil servants, airlines, and service providers.

In addition to the already known recommendation for the use of face masks, Anvisa suggests the adoption of the following measures:^[2]

Airport operators:

- Observe the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO);
- Intensify surveillance of suspected cases at airports so that the isolation measures necessary are taken and reporting to the relevant bodies is carried out;
- Disseminate audible warnings in all departure and arrival areas with the texts indicated by the health authorities;
- Notify the health authority of suspected cases identified in the airport area;
- Disseminate guidance on websites so that only passengers transit through terminals;
- Supervise cleaning teams to ensure the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of workers' personal protective equipment;
- Organize the movement of people in terminals in such a way as to allow a minimum distance of two meters;
- Increase the availability of hand sanitizer and liquid soap;
- Post informational materials with the prevention measures;
- Limit bus capacity to 50% of capacity in trips between terminals; and
- Keep the air conditioning systems with renewal of air at maximum capacity.

Airport civil servants and workers:

- Respect the minimum distance of two meters;
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or, if not possible, use 70% alcohol sanitizer;
- Avoid touching the eyes, mouth, and nose;
- Clean hands after coughing or sneezing;
- If suspected cases are reported, wear an apron, goggles, and gloves in addition to a surgical mask; and
- Use personal protective equipment.

Airlines:

- Publicize audible warnings on all flights, as indicated by the health authorities;

- | Supervise aircraft cleaning teams to ensure intensified cleaning procedures;
- | Leave only security cards in the pockets of the seats and ensure the process of cleaning and disinfecting cards;
- | Require crew and passengers to wear masks;
- | Carry out the cleaning and disinfection procedures at each stopover before the new passengers board;
- | Guide the disembarkation to ensure distance between passengers;
- | Organize check-in and boarding procedures, respecting the minimum distance of 2 meters;
- | Provide 70% alcohol sanitizer and liquid soap inside the aircraft;
- | Take steps to ensure as much air renewal as possible inside the aircraft;
- | Suspend in-flight services on domestic flights, or, if the company chooses to maintain services, prioritize food and beverages served in individual, sanitized packaging; and
- | Respond to requests for lists of travelers and crew members to enable the authorities to investigate suspected cases.

The technical note also includes guidelines for air taxi companies, specialized aeromedical transport companies and health inspection teams. The implementation of the measures will be supervised by a special working group set up at the request of the Ministry of Infrastructure and coordinated by Anac.

Moments of extreme economic stress such as that caused by the pandemic bring about financial consequences that are still immeasurable in the short term. On the other hand, they end up creating a favorable scenario for revising economic, management, and operational models, in addition to significantly speeding up the normally lengthy and bureaucratic process of drafting new standards.

One lesson that the pandemic provided to regulated sectors was the possibility of quick regulatory readaptation, without prejudice to the quality of the work developed. The actions of Anac and Anvisa so far is proof that it is possible to work efficiently in the preparation and alteration of rules and that regulation does not need to be synonymous with bureaucracy and slowness. The circumstances, although unfortunate, made two regulatory agencies work together with the same objective: to reduce the rate of contagion and ensure the survival of an economic activity of significant relevance to the functioning of Brazil.

The only certainty amid the chaos caused by the pandemic is that aviation and all its procedures will be drastically altered in the near future until the transmission of the virus is controlled. Until then, the joint effort of the authorities, private sector, and population will be essential.

[1] <https://www.anac.gov.br/noticias/2020/novas-medidas-sanitarias-em-aeroportos-e-aeronaves-reformam-uso-de-mascaras-e-protecao-aos-passageiros-e-profissionais>

[2] Technical Note No. 101/2020/SEI/GIMTV/GGPAF/DIRE5/ANVISA