

Returning to International Travel After COVID-19

Travel Bulletin: July 2021



President's letter

To Our Members:

As the current health crisis starts to wane in this country, the traveling public and the U.S. travel health nursing community are eager for international travel to fully resume. At the same time, travel health nurses are wondering how the COVID-19 pandemic might affect trip planning and traveler concerns about future journeys. This spring, ATHNA was given the opportunity to review data from one consumer survey commissioned by Emergent BioSolutions that sheds some light on traveler opinion on these topics. We share this Bulletin to alert our members about this data set and similar surveys now

commissioned as more Americans get vaccinated and international bookings increase. As with all studies, there are some limitations in the design of this survey that impact broader generalization of the data. That said, the opinions expressed by the questionnaire respondents can provide valuable insight into how individuals now view their personal health and safety while traveling. In coming months, as you prepare your patients for world trips, and as you interact with travel and tourism stakeholders, we hope you may find the information in this Bulletin useful for your practice.



Sandy Weinberg,
Interim President



Introduction

Travel health nursing and the travel and tourism sector – the combination of travel providers, such as travel advisors and booking platforms, suppliers, such as airlines, hotels and cruise lines, and destinations – have always shared an interest in promoting international travel as a positive force for society. As more people travel to different countries, they open themselves up to singular new experiences and gain a greater appreciation for the history, experiences and values of other cultures.

Yet, despite this shared sense of purpose, the travel medicine and travel health nursing fields and the travel and tourism sector have not always worked together as they might. The travel sector has been reluctant at times to embrace the benefits that the travel health community can offer. There has been a general lack of understanding and appreciation for the role and intent of travel health professionals.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now a new opportunity to come together to support the health and safety of travelers and the future of post-pandemic travel. In 2020, international travel was down 74% over 2019, according to the World Tourism Organization, with many trips having been altered, postponed or abandoned. The COVID-19 pandemic's economic impact on the travel and tourism sector led

to the loss of 61.6 million jobs globally, and the loss of \$4,500 billion in gross domestic product, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council. Yet we know that there is a great pent-up demand for travel, with many eager to get back on the roads and in the air.

As countries reopen and international travel resumes, a host of new questions are emerging about how to safely resume travel while minimizing risks. To try to better understand the mindset of travelers at this time, organizations within the travel and tourism sector have conducted consumer surveys in recent months. A majority of these studies suggest that travelers are now extremely focused on health and safety as an important part of their travel planning and experience. In this Bulletin we highlight a selection of the findings from one recent consumer survey to explore the strong desire on the part of international travelers to be more informed on health and safety issues relating to travel. This study provides the travel health clinician with a better understanding of the thoughts, concerns and intentions of one group of travelers. This research also suggests the possibility of a stronger future collaboration between the travel medicine and travel health nursing community and the travel sector.

About the Emergent Survey

An online survey of 1,059 international travelers was conducted between Aug. 31 and Sept. 3, 2020 among U.S. residents. The survey was commissioned by Emergent BioSolutions, a leading provider of travel health vaccines, and conducted by OrangeFiery, a market research and consulting firm. Respondents were recruited from a broad, national online audience panel hosted by the survey panel firm Centiment. The survey contained 42 questions and took an average of 11 minutes and 24 seconds to complete. It had a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of +/- 3%.

Eighty-six percent of respondents said they had traveled outside of North America and Western Europe. Survey respondents said they traveled internationally for multiple reasons, including beach/leisure vacations (68%), adventure vacations (52%), visiting friends and relatives (44%) and business travel (52%). Most respondents (79%) said they traveled internationally at least once per year. More than half (52%) said the duration of their trips was one to two weeks.

In the following paragraphs a selection of survey responses are highlighted.

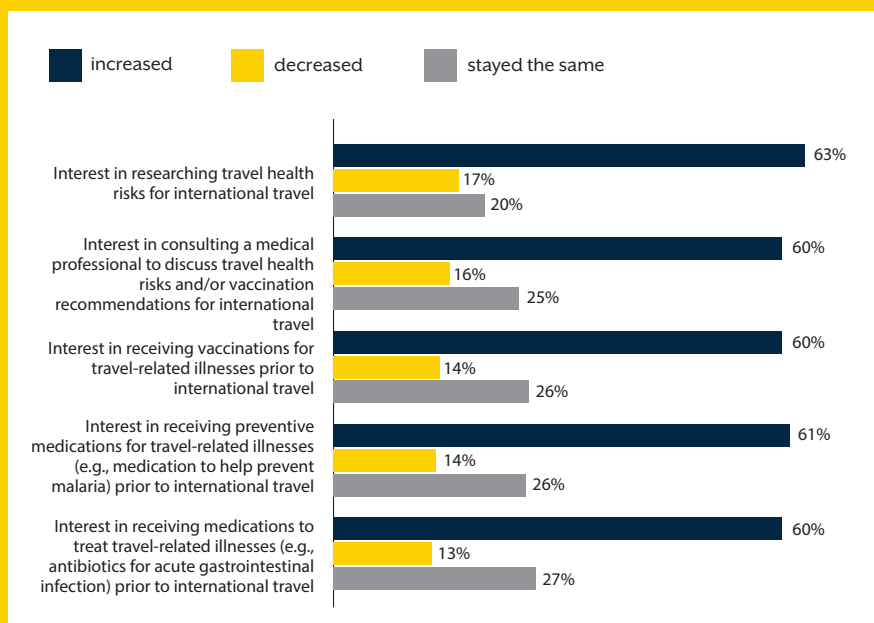
Heightened Interest in Travel Health

As demonstrated in responses in Figure 1, the survey showed COVID-19 has significantly increased travelers' focus on and interest in travel health. Of the respondents in the survey:

- 63% said they were now more interested in researching travel risks for international travel
- 60% said they were now more interested in consulting a medical professional to discuss travel health risks
- 60% said they were now more interested in receiving preventive or prophylactic medications for travel-related illnesses prior to international travel
- 60% said they were now more interested in receiving vaccinations for travel-related illnesses prior to international travel

This increase in interest in travel health could be important because the travelers surveyed indicated they usually check for travel health and vaccination recommendations in the area they are visiting before traveling. More than 60% said they “always” check for such recommendations and 32% said they do so “sometimes.”

Figure 1: Since the COVID-19 pandemic, would you say that your interest in the following has increased, decreased or stayed the same?



These responses suggest that this sample of international travelers sees the pandemic as having elevated the importance of learning about and preparing for potential travel health issues. At a local, regional and global level, it would be important for travel sector stakeholders to recognize that this increased interest is an opportunity to bring international travelers into greater direct contact with health professionals, such as travel health nurses, to provide health and safety risk reduction recommendations, prevention counseling and potential prophylactic care, where appropriate.

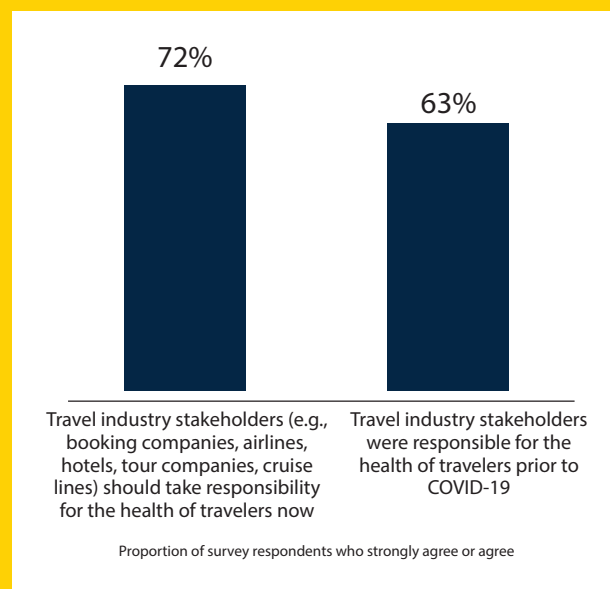
Increased Expectations of Travel Industry Among Travelers Around Health

As demonstrated in responses in Figures 2 and 3, this survey suggested that international travelers expect the travel sector to prioritize their health and safety. Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about the role of travel sector stakeholders in providing information, education and, most importantly, referrals for consultation

with a travel health expert. Travel sector stakeholders were defined as airlines, airports, cruise lines, destination country governments, employers (for business travel), hotel or other accommodation providers, inter-country train or bus companies, online booking companies, tour companies, travel agents, travel influencers (e.g., individuals who are experts at travel), travel insurance companies, U.S. government health agencies (e.g., CDC) and U.S. government transportation agencies (e.g., TSA). It is important to note that because these questions focused on traveler perceptions of the role of travel sector stakeholders, travel health clinics and physician offices were not included as choices.

Respondents said they believe travel sector stakeholders hold greater responsibility for the health of travelers now (72%) than prior to the pandemic (62%). This increased expectation around 'duty of care' suggests health and safety in the context of international travel is now expected to be a top priority for the travel sector.

Figure 2: How much do you agree with the following statements?



In fact, survey respondents said sharing information and recommendations about travel health would be a key factor in getting them back to traveling. Respondents said it would make them more willing to travel if their travel provider (e.g., hotel, airline or tour company):

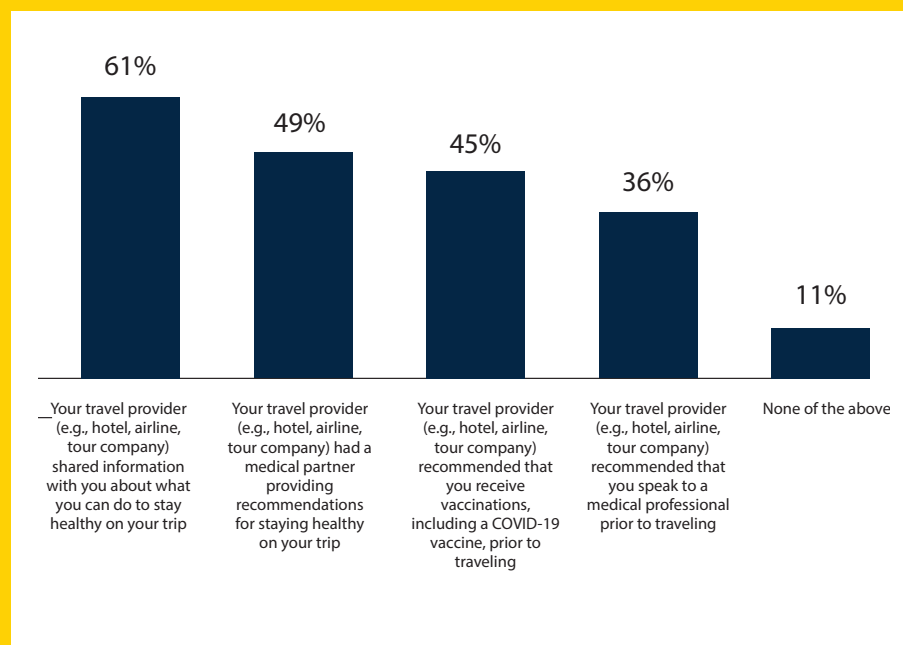
- Shared information about what travelers could do to stay healthy on their trip (61%)
- Had a medical partner providing recommendations for staying healthy on their trip (49%)
- Recommended that they speak to a medical professional prior to traveling (36%)

Receptivity to Health Information from Travel Industry Stakeholders

Rather surprisingly, as seen in Figure 4, survey respondents said they were about as receptive to receiving information about how to stay healthy when they travel from members of the travel sector as from government agencies. Given the same choices of travel sector stakeholders as noted above, respondents said they were open to this type of information from airlines (90%), airports (83%), U.S. government health agencies such as the CDC (80%), destination country governments (80%), hotels (78%), travel insurers (76%), travel agents (75%) and others.

In fact, while the CDC was the party most respondents (63%) said they believed was most responsible for providing health information, other travel sector

Figure 3: What would increase your willingness to travel? (select all that apply)



stakeholders — airlines (51%), the Transportation Security Administration (50%), airports (43%) and travel agents (36%) — were also viewed as responsible for disseminating health information to travelers.

Respondents indicated they felt they would trust health information from the federal government (CDC, 65%; TSA, 55%) more than the travel and tourism sector (airlines, 45%; airports, 42%; destination country governments, 39%; travel insurance companies, 36%). Yet when asked to select their “top 5” most trusted parties from a list of 14 sources of health information, 10 sources received votes from at least one-third of the respondents. After CDC (65%) and TSA (52%), respondents listed intercountry train or bus lines (47%), airlines (46%), travel agents (43%), destination country governments (38%), tour companies (37%), airports (35%), cruise lines (34%) and online booking companies (33%). This suggests that the door is open for many different stakeholders in the travel sector to direct international travelers to qualified health professionals knowledgeable about travel health where they can receive risk reduction recommendations pertaining to their itinerary.

In fact, travel and tourism stakeholders directing international travelers to qualified health professionals may accelerate the return of international travel. In general, more than 80% of survey respondents said receiving travel health information from trusted parties would positively influence travel and travel health-related behavior (Figure 5):

- 87% agreed or strongly agreed it would make them more likely to travel
- 85% agreed or strongly agreed it would make them more comfortable with traveling
- 80% agreed or strongly agreed it would have an impact on whether they seek travel health advice from a medical and nursing professional prior to traveling

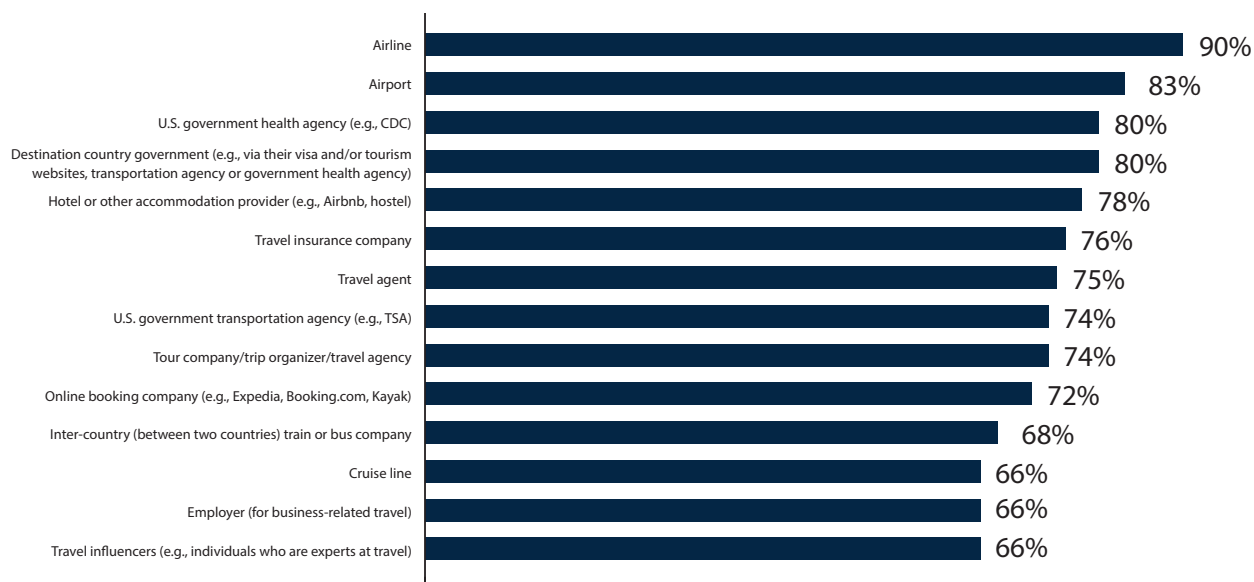
Survey respondents reported if travel sector stakeholders were to share appropriate information from or vetted by a medical or nursing professional about travel health with travelers, travelers' interest in using them again would increase.

COVID-19 Vaccines and the Return to International Travel

When it comes to vaccinations, the international travelers surveyed said being vaccinated for COVID-19 is the most important factor that will make them feel safer about traveling in the future.

Respondents indicated that they were either very likely (48%) or extremely likely (25%) to get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it was available. (Note: this survey was conducted before any vaccines were approved for use under the FDA's Emergency Use Authorization process.) While methodologies varied, this represented a greater intention to be vaccinated than other contemporaneous general population surveys of U.S. residents. This suggests international travelers could be a strong sub-population for COVID-19 vaccination outreach.

Figure 4: Would you be open to receiving information from the following parties to help you stay healthy when you travel*?



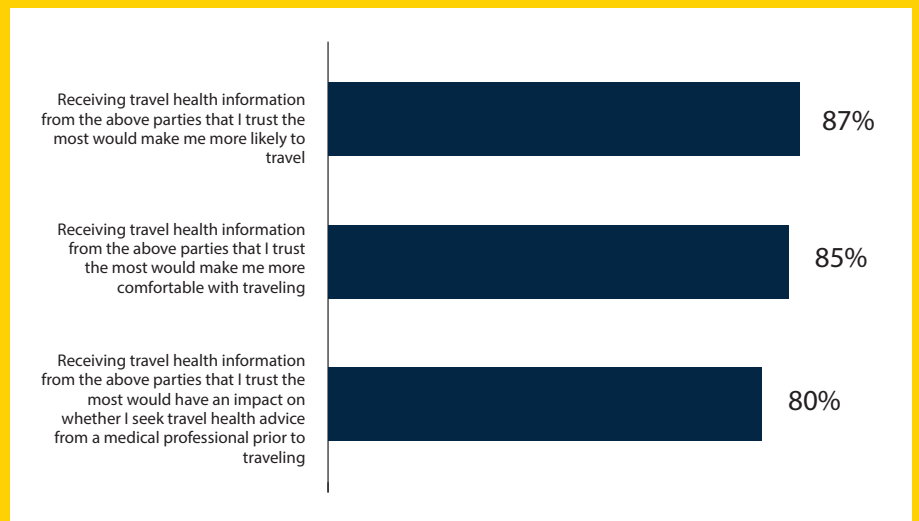
* Note: this question did not ask about openness to receiving information from travel health professionals

Survey respondents suggest that they will evaluate multiple factors relating to health and safety when they return to travel. They indicated that COVID-19 vaccination rates at international destinations would have an influence on their travel plans. Half the survey respondents said that they would have to see vaccination rates above 61% to feel safe enough to travel to that location.

When asked which sources' recommendations would prompt them to get vaccinated for a disease if they were to be traveling to an

endemic region, 82% of respondents to this survey said medical professionals, a positive vote for travel health nurses. But respondents also said vaccine recommendations from airlines (81%), destination country governments (80%), the CDC (80%), TSA (79%), airports (75%), travel insurers (75%) and other stakeholders would also make them likely to be vaccinated.

Figure 5: How much do you agree with the following statements?

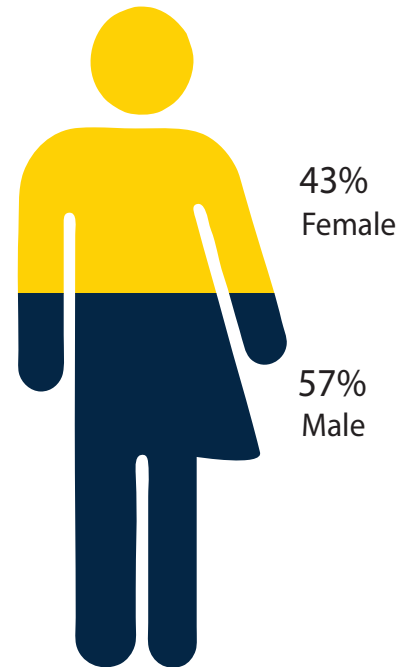


Survey methodology

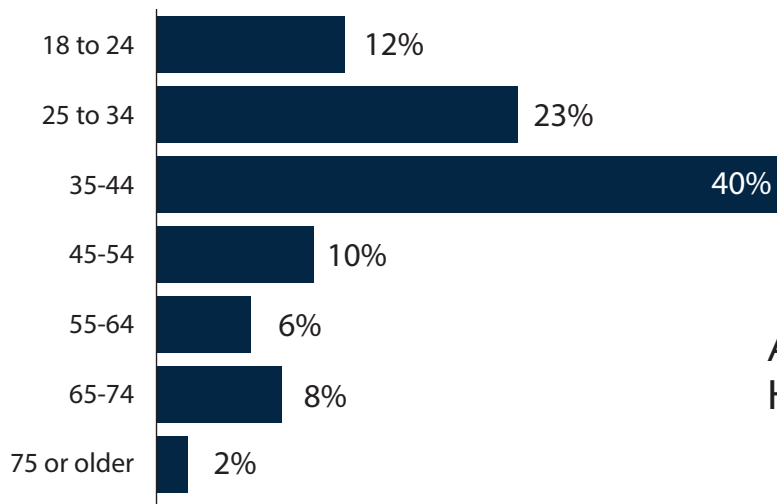
This survey was conducted online between Aug. 31 and Sept. 3, 2020. A set of 4,107 panelists was sent the link to the survey by Centiment, based on having previously told Centiment that they traveled by airplane for business, leisure or both. They were offered a modest incentive (between \$1.75 and \$5.25, based on a demand-based algorithm designed to optimize responses) to participate. Ultimately 1,059 panelists completed the survey. Each respondent indicated that they had traveled internationally within the past three years and planned to travel internationally again within the next three years. Individuals who said they traveled internationally for military or government work were screened out of the survey. Respondents lived within all regions of the United States.

Following is an overview of the demographics of the respondents:

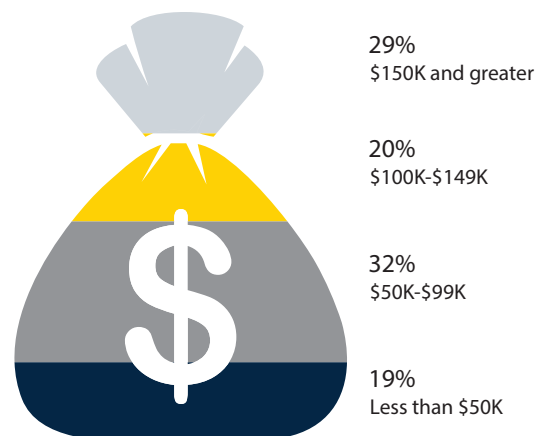
Gender



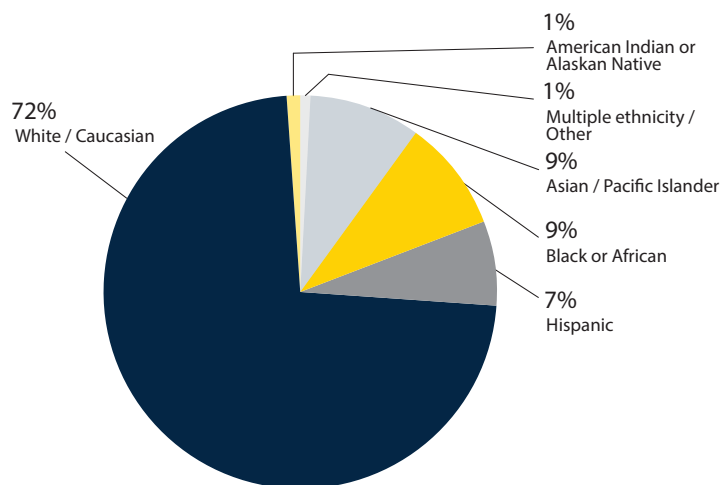
Age



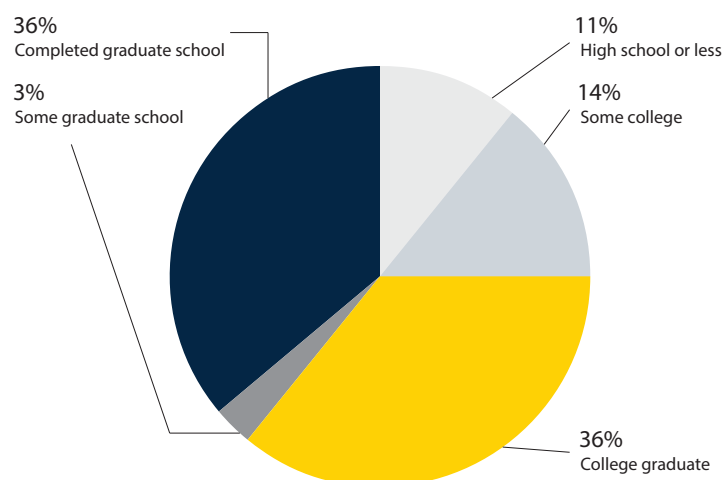
Approximate Average Household Income



Race/ethnicity



Highest Educational Level Completed



Survey Limitations

Every study has its limitations. As a cross-sectional, non-experimental design survey, this study cannot fully mirror the general population of all travelers. The Centiment survey panel is a leading industry panel; however, it should be noted that the respondents to this survey are distinct in some ways from the overall profile of U.S. international travelers and the travelers often seen as patients in our various travel health clinics. For example, older travelers are under-represented in this survey. This may be attributable to the fact that Centiment uses an online panel recruited from social media outlets and other online sources and the only data collection method was a computer-based questionnaire, rather than a mixed-method approach utilizing in-person interviews, phone interviews, etc. Lack of randomized sampling is another limitation to consider when applying this survey's data more broadly, as is the use of an incentive payment, although nominal, to take and complete the survey. Future research might address these limitations.

Implications for Travel Health Nursing and the Travel Sector

These data suggest that international travelers are both open to and interested in information about travel health issues, from behavioral risks to endemic and epidemic disease risks. Through direct services, to individuals and families, the travel health nursing community stands poised to help the travel sector—and international travelers—make a strong return to travel over the next several years.

Travel sector stakeholders will want to take greater responsibility for providing accurate and up-to-date travel health information to travelers, as well as resources and recommendations for how travelers can access travel health medical expertise.

1. Importance of individualized risk assessment

This survey indicates that travelers may have an interest in receiving health and safety advice directly from the travel sector. It is important that travel health nurses continue to educate the public and the travel and tourism sector that travel health is not one size fits all. Not every traveler to a particular country will need the same vaccines, behavioral counseling or preventive medication. Individualized risk assessment is the critical first step in every travel health encounter. Few travelers appreciate that many variables impact a journey, not just destination (e.g., traveler's health history, immunizations, reason for travel, trip duration, climate, planned activities and accommodations, and more). The travel health nursing professional always works with the traveler to develop a comprehensive, customized risk reduction plan with a goal of remaining safe and healthy during travel.

2. Stay informed on new traveler-related research

Travel health nurses may want to compare this set of findings with other consumer surveys published by healthcare organizations, tour companies, travel agents, insurance companies, the hospitality sector and the pharmaceutical sector. This survey sample included adult travelers but only a small percentage were seniors who now comprise a significant travel population seen in our clinics.

3. Build awareness of reliable health information sources

We know that travelers have always sought pretravel advice from a variety of sources, in addition to qualified travel health providers. In our offices every day we learn of guidance received from relatives and neighbors, sometimes strangers, Internet chat rooms, social media and other sources. This survey confirms a willingness on the part of travelers to accept health and safety guidance from members of the travel and tourism sector. As professionals with special expertise in the preparation and evaluation of travelers, travel health nurses will want to always encourage patients to vet travel health information sources, rely on U.S. national standards and abide by the recommendations of valued and trusted experts.

4. Keep abreast of new initiatives supporting travelers

This travel bulletin includes mention of possible new initiatives on the part of the travel and tourism sector to support international travel and travelers. This can be good news for the well-being of our patients and the destinations to which they travel. ATHNA encourages all its members to keep abreast of any new health and safety developments and how they may impact traveler decision-making.

5. Travel health and travel sector relationships

Travel health nurses can anticipate that opportunities to collaborate with the travel and tourism sector may increase as international travel returns. Now may be an opportunity as ATHNA members to connect or reconnect with members of the travel and tourism sector in their areas with the goal of increasing awareness of local travel health nursing resources. Members should know that ATHNA is available to assist in the consideration, evaluation and implementation of proposals that benefit our travelers and our nursing specialty.

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Conclusion

COVID-19 has dramatically changed the current realities of travel and negatively impacted both the travel sector and the practice of travel health nursing. But the pandemic has also given us an opportunity to reimagine the future of travel and the role of the travel health professional.

This one survey of a sample of international travelers demonstrates that there is a strong interest on the part of travelers to increase the flow of travel health information. There are tangible benefits, both in terms of stimulating demand for international travel generally, and for promoting the health and safety among international travelers.

As much as COVID-19 vaccines present a valuable tool against the pandemic, recent surges, COVID-19 variants, destination healthcare infrastructure, destination vaccination rates, hospitalization rates, and traveler access to medical care will all be important factors in the post-pandemic return to international travel. Navigating this complexity will require travel health nursing and other travel medicine disciplines to play an increasingly important role in collaboration with travel sector stakeholders in the future. Creating a better system that helps international travelers remain healthy and safe while traveling requires greater dialogue, education and collaboration between travel health nurses and other healthcare professionals and the travel sector. Opportunities to increase dialogue and collaboration should be encouraged.

Travel health nursing is one of many stakeholders that holds a key to the healthy return to international travel. Getting this right may result not only in better educated and better protected international travelers, but in a stronger and more resilient travel sector. Now is the time to advance this dialogue and promote collaboration.



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