



Briefing

PHYSICAL DISTANCING ON FLIGHTS AT ALERT LEVEL 4

To: Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister
Hon Grant Robertson
Deputy Prime Minister
Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response
Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall
Associate Minister of Health
Hon Andrew Little
Minister of Health
Hon Kris Faafoi
Minister of Justice

Date	18/08/2021	Priority	High
Deadline	18/08/2021	Briefing Number	[Briefing Number]

Purpose

This paper seeks a decision on whether to expect physical distancing on domestic passenger flights at Alert Level 4 following the initial 48 hour period where distancing is not expected.

Recommendations

1. **Note** that Ministers agreed to no physical distancing being expected on domestic passenger flights at Alert Level 4 for the first 48 hours to allow people to return home.
2. **Note** that public health advice is that physical distancing of 2m on flights is not required as other public health measures are in place to manage the risk.

- 3. **Agree** to physical distancing being expected for domestic passenger flights following the initial 48 hour period (status quo)

OR

YES / NO

- 4. **Agree** to not expect physical distancing on domestic passenger flights at Alert Level 4.

AND

YES / NO

- 5. **Agree** that wearing a mask be required throughout the passenger journey

YES / NO

Ruth Fairhall Head of Strategy & Policy	Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern Prime Minister
...../...../2021/...../2021
Hon Grant Robertson Deputy Prime Minister	Hon Chris Hipkins Minister for COVID-19 Response
...../...../2021/...../2021

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Contact for telephone discussion if required:

Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Ruth Fairhall	Head of Strategy & Policy, COVID-19 Group	s9(2)(a)	✓
Alice Hume	Policy Manager		

Minister's office comments:

- Noted
- Seen
- Approved
- Needs change
- Withdrawn
- Not seen by Minister
- Overtaken by events
- Referred to

Proactively Released

PHYSICAL DISTANCING ON FLIGHTS AT ALERT LEVEL 4

Purpose

1. To seek your decision on whether to expect physical distancing on domestic passenger flights at Alert Level 4 following the initial 48 hour period where distancing is not expected.

Background

2. On 17 August 2021 Ministers agreed that the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order be drafted to allow 48 hours for people who were away from their normal residence to return home. They agreed that in order to ensure that people were able to travel within this period that physical distancing would not be expected on domestic passenger flights as other public health measures would be in place.
3. The Order does not impose a specific physical distancing requirement on flights. Instead, physical distancing is required under the Order so far as is reasonably practicable, supported by guidance issued by the Ministry of Transport that sets Government's expectations for distancing. The current guidance gives effect to Minister's decisions, by (a) stating that flights can run in the first 48 hours without physical distancing, and (b) setting out physically distanced seating configurations expected for the period after 48 hours.

Public health risks are manageable through existing measures without requiring physical distancing

4. Public health advice is that 2m physical distancing on flights is not required, following the initial 48 hour period, as long as providers maintain physical distancing as far as is reasonably practicable, given that other public health measures are in place to manage the risk.
5. This advice is based on the additional public health measures and the environmental factors in place during domestic flights.
6. Passengers are required to wear a mask during air travel. Guidance has been given to airlines that food and drink services should be suspended at Alert Level 4, therefore masks will be required throughout flights. Mask wearing on flights is generally well adhered to and actively managed by the airlines.
7. Although a flight is an indoor setting, the risk is reduced by the plane's ventilation system.
8. Contact tracing is straightforward due to named passenger lists and known seating arrangements on all flights.
9. This in line with previous advice provided by the Ministry.
10. If you decide that physical distancing is not required, the Ministry of Health recommends that wearing a mask throughout the passenger's whole journey be made a requirement (with the usual exceptions).

Requiring physical distancing could limit the ability of flights to operate

11. The Ministry of Transport advise that expecting physical distancing would significantly limit the capacity of domestic flights. Given health advice, reducing capacity of these flights does not appear to be necessary or desirable and would impede the ability of people to return home.
12. The Ministry of Transport advises that due to the large number of people booked on flights over the next few days the ability for people to move to a flight within the initial 48 hour period is limited.
13. Additionally, many people outside Auckland may have chosen to shelter in place with the expectation that Alert Level 4 will only apply for 72 hours. Should the Alert Level 4 be extended, there may be further demand for people to return home.
14. There may therefore be a need to amend the Order to allow return home after 48 hours. The Ministry is monitoring this situation and will report back if a change to the return home period is desirable.

Next Steps

15. Officials are seeking a decision on whether or not to expect physical distancing on domestic passenger flights following the initial 48 hour period, noting that public health advice is that the risk can be managed through other measures already in place.
16. If you decide not to expect physical distancing on domestic passenger flights, the Ministry of Transport will amend its guidance to the transport sector.

Consultation

17. The Ministry of Health, Crown Law and the Ministry of Transport were consulted on the advice in this paper.

Communications

18. The Ministry of Transport will update their guidance to transport operators.