

Can technology make flying feel safe again? Companies scramble to remove the COVID-19 risk from planes

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Across the world, the aviation industry is scrambling to find ways to keep the COVID-19 risk out of airplanes with high-tech filtration and advanced cleaning. American Airlines has partnered with medical advisers at Vanderbilt University and its competitors have made similar

moves. Every airline is requiring masks. Southwest Airlines has adopted the "Southwest Promise," which includes limiting capacity on flights to allow passengers to social distance.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to turn the airline industry upside down with no end in sight, suppliers are preparing for the inevitable future where cleanliness and germ-fighting is a high priority for customers.

North Texas manufacturer Aereos thinks antimicrobial plastics may be one solution to help cut the risk of spreading COVID-19 on commercial airline flights. And Dallas-based Allied BioScience has gotten [government approval](#) to spray a disinfectant coating in planes that's billed as killing germs for up to a week.

With commercial air traffic still at historic lows and passengers continually wary of flying, Aereos says it has brought antimicrobial technology to high-touch surfaces inside commercial jetliners, such as tray tables, armrests, door handles and toilets.

The antimicrobial technology can cut down on the growth of germs and virus such as COVID-19, Aereos partner David Baker said.

"It's just starting to catch a lot of interest," said Baker, whose company recently released the line. "Especially considering that it's a pandemic, it's one way of making them feel comfortable. This provides them with a layer of protection."

Fort Worth-based American Airlines and Allied BioScience received emergency approval last month from the Environmental Protection Agency for a spray-on coating product that is intended to protect against COVID-19 and other germs for at least a week.

The perception of heightened cleaning and hygiene on commercial aircraft is a "huge deal" to consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic, said Jamie Larounis, a travel consultant and writer for Upgradedpoints.com.

"This, in combination with social distancing efforts, is what is building consumer confidence that the airlines are doing their part to provide a safe experience," Larounis said.

It's unclear how much of the novel coronavirus is spread via surfaces, but airlines are still touting enhanced cleaning procedures along with state-of-the-art air filtering technologies, face masks and social distancing. Companies are experimenting with ultraviolet lighting to help kill COVID-19 and Southwest is testing thermal imaging cameras to detect fevers among passengers.

"The primary and most important mode of transmission for COVID-19 is through close contact from person-to-person," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Based on data from lab studies on COVID-19 and what we know about similar respiratory diseases, it may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this isn't thought to be the main way the virus spreads."

Aereos, based in Euless, makes replacement interior airplane parts and custom cabin items, such as tray tables, latches, toilet seats and window shades along with carts and other items used by flight attendants. Baker said the company started experimenting with antimicrobial additives on those parts in May and has them ready for sale to airlines looking to replace aircraft parts.

Aereos makes the parts at its North Texas manufacturing facility. The

company also does work in the aerospace sector in maintenance, overhaul and defense, but the COVID-19 pandemic has created problems for nearly every corner of the airline industry, Baker said.

The antimicrobial technology has grown popular over the last decade in hospitals to cut down on infections and in some medical supplies and devices. The plastics don't completely kill viruses such as COVID-19 on contact but instead work to inhibit the growth of viruses and germs, slowing down the life of contagions.

"Current evidence suggests that SARS-CoV-2 may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials," according to the CDC's website.

That leaves airlines, airports and even government agencies working to reduce touch points during the air travel experience at security screening points, at gates and on airplanes—evidence at least that there is concern that touching objects can spread viruses.

Baker said he doesn't have any independent research on how effective the plastics are, but tests within the company have been promising.

"Very little had to be changed about what we do, and it essentially costs nothing extra," Baker said. "We don't expect airlines to go out and replace every single part, but you could start replacing parts as they break or on an airplane one at a time until your whole fleet is done."

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