



Fact Sheet: Cruise Ships & Covid

On March 14, 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a No Sail Order for cruise ships to prevent further mass outbreaks of the disease on board these vessels, and the risk of community transmission and overburdened health systems. This decisive action suspended all cruise ship operations in waters subject to US jurisdiction. The CDC took this unprecedented step in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the increased risk of spread of Covid-19 on cruise ships. It extended its No Sail Order on April 15, 2020 and July 21, 2020. On Tuesday, September 29, one day before the No Sail Order expired, it was reported that the Trump administration intervened to prevent the CDC from extending it past October 31, 2020, despite the recommendations from the highest public health agency in the United States that it be extended through February 2021.

History of Disease & Air Pollution on Cruises:

The Covid-19 pandemic is not the first time cruise ships have been a vector for disease. From respiratory infections to gastrointestinal infections such as norovirus, cruise ship operators have long demonstrated their inability to adequately prevent the spread of communicable diseases within the crowded environment on board these vessels. The health risks may be further compounded by exposure to high levels of air pollution while on board. The vast majority of cruise ships burn the dirtiest, cheapest fossil fuel available, heavy fuel oil (HFO). HFO is the thick, residual sludge left over after other petroleum products are distilled from crude oil. It is high in dangerous substances such as toxic heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, sulfur, among other contaminants. The combustion of heavy fuel oil not only contributes to climate change, but also puts the health of passengers, crew, and port communities at risk. Exposure to air pollution and particulate matter has been shown to increase the risk of severe respiratory illnesses.

“Cruises inherently have conditions that can promote infectious-disease spread,” Henry Wu, assistant professor of infectious diseases at Emory University School of Medicine and director of the Emory TravelWell Center.

Cruise ships are conduits for a pandemic due to the confined, crowded spaces and unsanitary environments, posing a well-documented risk both onboard and on shore. Onboard, the ship’s airtight seals, recirculated air, confined cabin spaces, and population densities lend them to rapid contagion. In addition, sanitation practices notoriously cut corners, leading to further dispersion. Once ashore, travelers disperse to different cities and countries, and crew members transfer between ships, spreading disease nationally and internationally.

Cruise Ships & COVID:

On January 25, 2020, Carnival Corporation's Diamond Princess cruise ship allowed a symptomatic passenger who was later diagnosed with Covid-19 to disembark in Hong Kong. The cruise operator's delayed response and field containment efforts once it finally took action, led to the Diamond Princess being the largest Covid-19 outbreak at the time outside of China. Seven hundred and twelve people, approximately 20% of those on board this vessel, were infected with the virus. Thirteen lost their lives to it. The Covid-19 outbreaks on board cruise vessels in the ensuing months were so significant that cruise ships are the only private industry whose transportation vessels are included in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health list of global country infection and death rates. In the following six months after the Diamond Princess outbreak:



- The cruise industry experienced 99 recorded outbreaks on 123 different cruise ships.
- 80% of cruise ships were affected by Covid-19.
- Cruise ships had 2,973 Covid-19 or COVID-like illness cases and 34 deaths between March 1 and July 10, 2020.
- The CDC linked the spread of Covid-19 from passengers on cruise ships to 15 states.

The current scientific evidence suggests that cruise ships pose a greater risk of Covid-19 transmission than cities or most other living situations because of their high population density

onboard. While this is one contributing factor, CDC's surveillance data show that drastically *decreasing* population onboard does not stop transmission. Other factors likely contributing to onboard transmission are:

- Crew living and working in close quarters in a partially enclosed environment where social distancing may prove challenging, even with a limited number of people onboard.
- Mild illnesses and asymptomatic infections make case detection, isolation and quarantine practices based on clinical presentation alone challenging. Thus, covert spread of infection among crew may keep the virus circulating from one voyage to the next. Disease can spread between ships when crew members from a ship with an outbreak transfer to other ships.

For these reasons, outbreaks of Covid-19 on cruise ships pose a risk for rapid spread of disease beyond the voyage and into communities across the globe. Because of the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 pandemic and the high risk of Covid-19 spread on cruise ships, the US government issued a No Sail Order for cruise ships in waters subject to US jurisdiction and has advised US travelers to [defer all cruise travel](#).

Cruise Industry's Responsibility:

Cruise ship companies across the industry uniformly made an irresponsible choice to continue to sail during the pandemic which, in turn, played an active role in spreading Covid-19. Rather than act responsibly and cancel all cruises on [February 4, 2020 when COVID first hit](#), cruise companies continued to pack their ships with thousands of people per voyage. These corporations knowingly and willfully continued to operate cruise ships at a time when the Diamond Princess had already demonstrated the risks, and top employees in charge of Carnival's Diamond Princess ship [delayed in responding to an early confirmed case of the coronavirus](#). The ship ultimately became "the largest outbreak outside mainland China" in the early stages of the pandemic, [according to the](#) CDC. During the pandemic, cruise operators repeatedly failed to prevent further outbreaks and protect the health of passengers, crew, and onshore communities. The choice to continue cruising after pandemic outbreaks onboard reflects a profound and systemic failure of civil, ethical, and moral responsibility. Allowing potentially infected passengers to disembark and travel home via public transportation demonstrated extraordinarily irresponsible behavior. These choices put public health at risk, and demonstrated once again how cruise companies fail to prioritize the health and safety of passengers, crew, and communities. Cruise ships cannot be trusted to provide safe passage, especially during a pandemic.

"For health emergencies, cruise ships are a 'worst case scenario,' " said Tara C. Smith, a professor of epidemiology at Kent State University who has [written about](#) the health challenges of cruise travel.

"The risk of COVID-19 on cruise ships is very high." - the U.S. Centers for Disease Control issued a [travel advisory](#). According to the CDC: "cruising safely and responsibly during a global pandemic is very challenging" because "cruise ship travel facilitates and amplifies transmission of COVID-19."

For more information: <https://globalcruiseactivistnetwork.com/>

