

Review: Many sick airline passengers aren't reported

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Hundreds of people at major U.S. airports each year are severely ill with symptoms of potentially contagious diseases, yet few are reported to health officials as intended under U.S. regulations and international guidelines, a USA TODAY review of ambulance records and federal data shows.

To detect diseases such as pandemic flu, tuberculosis and measles, federal regulations require airlines to notify health officials of passenger illnesses involving diarrhea or fever plus rash, swollen glands or jaundice. The International Civil Aviation Organization, a United Nations agency, also includes persistent vomiting or coughing in its guidelines.

Concerns about fliers spreading dangerous diseases have been fueled by the 2003 SARS outbreak, high-profile tuberculosis patients and the H1N1 flu pandemic.

In 2009, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's](#) 20 U.S. regional quarantine stations received 1,623 reports of illnesses or deaths involving airline passengers, data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show. Yet in some CDC regions, ambulance records at a single airport show far more people receiving emergency medical treatment for illnesses than were reported from multiple states.

Most illnesses reported to the CDC don't require intervention, agency quarantine director Martin Cetron says. Under-reporting is a concern because the CDC can't assess what it doesn't know about. Cetron has occasionally learned of unreported deaths: "If things as dramatic as someone dying onboard are going unreported, one can only imagine the underreporting is significant."

Airlines comply with illness reporting, but flight crews aren't medical professionals, said Katherine Andrus of the Air Transport Association, who questioned how meaningful the ambulance data are. She said some passengers hide or lack symptoms when on planes; others may just have allergies or air sickness.

The CDC couldn't cite examples where failure to report caused an outbreak but pointed to a 2004 incident as a close call. An airline passenger with Lassa fever flew from Africa to

Newark with a high fever and diarrhea. The man was hospitalized hours after landing and later died, but he was never reported by airline staff. No other passengers were infected.

Here's how reports to CDC quarantine stations in 2009 compare with ambulance runs at one airport in their region:

•**Atlanta region:** 102 reports from Georgia, the Carolinas and Tennessee. At Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, medics cared for 473 people records specify as having fever, diarrhea, vomiting or flu.

•**Miami region:** 91 reports from Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. At Miami International Airport, medics treated 185 people data described as ill, feverish, vomiting, having diarrhea or flu.

•**Chicago region:** 210 reports from Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Iowa. Chicago O'Hare International Airport had 613 ambulance runs for "sick" people, but data don't specify symptoms.

•**Minneapolis-St. Paul region:** 51 reports from Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota. Medics were sent 326 times to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport for reasons coded only as "one sick."

The data don't always say whether the person was a passenger, and limited detail about symptoms make it hard to know if the illness met reporting criteria. Still, Cetron said, "there's a possibility that significant problems may not be getting reported the way they should."

Health experts disagree on the merits of reporting ill fliers. Jennifer Nuzzo at the [University of Pittsburgh's](#) Center for Biosecurity doubts it can do much to stop outbreaks. Georges Benjamin of the [American Public Health Association](#) said it's needed because CDC quarantine officers can't meet every plane: "It's a potential hole in the system."