

How to Stay Safer on Mass Transit

Timing your trip strategically, using contactless payments and not eating onboard are some of the things to keep in mind.

By Katherine Cusumano

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In cities across the country, ridership on public transportation has dropped precipitously as people have stayed home to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. But for some, continuing to take mass transit was never optional. Many essential workers who cannot work remotely or don't drive have continued to ride buses, trains and ferries; they are disproportionately people of color and the earners of lower incomes.

"The pandemic itself has changed the profile of who's using the services and what they're using them for," said Brian Taylor, a professor of urban planning and public policy at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It is mostly riders without other options who are coming back to public transit so far" — that is, if they ever stopped riding. (The school's Institute of Transportation Studies, which Dr. Taylor directs, is studying the effects of the pandemic on transportation, including on public transit ridership, operations and finance.)

In some areas, ridership is now rebounding as businesses and workplaces reopen: Last week in New York, subway ridership was down by 70 to 80 percent — but that's compared with as much as 93 percent in April. And thanks to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's new cleaning protocols (and suspended service between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m. for sanitizing), the trains sparkle.

"At the beginning, they were thought of as sort of virus trains," said Sarah M. Kaufman, the associate director of the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University. That has been largely disproved; in Paris and Tokyo, for example, the cities' crowded trains have not been linked to outbreak clusters. (Transit workers, though, have suffered a steep toll: In New York, 131 M.T.A. workers have died and more than 4,000 have tested positive for the virus. Some employees have cited a lack of widespread mask-wearing and social distancing early in the pandemic.)

So as traffic picks up again, on the streets and underground, what are the best strategies to stay safe while commuting and making essential trips? Here, a few experts weigh in.

Choose your method wisely.

If you plan to go somewhere, evaluate which means of transportation poses the least risk to yourself and others. "The more that you can be in open air and the farther you can be from other people and the less likely that other people will be without a mask is the safest way to go," said Robyn Gershon, a professor of epidemiology at New York University focused on occupational and environmental safety. Dr. Gershon and a team of scientists are working with TWU Local 100, a transit union in New York that represents roughly 46,000 bus and subway workers, to study the impact of the outbreak on its members.

Take into account how long you'll be waiting for your chosen vessel to arrive, she explained, and whether the terminal or station is inside or outside. You could get to the ferry dock early, for instance, to ensure that you get a seat on the upper deck in the open air; even inside, there's probably ample air circulation and space to spread out. If you're riding the bus, try to sit near a window, and keep it open. Don't do this on the subway, though: New York's underground tunnels are "full of steel dust and asbestos," Dr. Kaufman explained. Choose the escalator or stairs over the elevator if you can.

Or travel by bicycle. The use of bike-share programs in New York and Chicago has ballooned; by June, Citi Bike had nearly 180,000 active users — across Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Jersey City — and bikes became difficult to buy throughout the country. "My bike has been getting a lot more miles than it ever has before," said Dr. Mirna Mohanraj, a pulmonary and critical care specialist at Mount Sinai Morningside, who has been riding all over Manhattan, including some morning trips to Central Park, and into the Bronx and Brooklyn.

Most important, "if anyone has any symptoms or thinks they're sick, they should not take public transportation," said Dr. Georges Benjamin, the executive director of the American Public Health Association. Instead, they should stay home and get in touch with their doctor.



Marc A. Hermann/MTA

Pack well, but don't overdo it.

Don't leave home without a bottle of hand sanitizer that's at least 60 percent alcohol and disinfectant wipes to clean your phone, which is a germ magnet. And anytime you're in close quarters with other people, wear your mask, which "protects you from them and them from you," Dr. Benjamin said.

Some transportation agencies have made this easier by installing sanitizer dispensers and offering masks. In San Francisco, Bay Area Rapid Transit agents have distributed masks to riders at stations across the city, and in Portland, Ore., mask dispensers have been added to TriMet buses and trains. The M.T.A. recently formed a volunteer "mask force" — clad in unmistakable yellow shirts — who roam the subways and buses handing out free masks.

Don't bring more than necessary: More than ever, Dr. Gershon said, you don't want to leave your bag sitting on the floor, saddling you with yet another thing you should disinfect.

Be strategic about your timing.

In Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority has introduced a real-time congestion tracker for more than 30 bus lines, with a simple taxonomy (“not crowded,” “some crowding,” “crowded”), in an effort to help riders make informed decisions about their travel times. The M.T.A. is putting in effect a similar program: Onbuses, sensors count the number of passengers, which is then communicated to potential riders through the agency's app.

Regardless of whether your local transit network makes such data available, you can attempt to avoid typically crowded times. Find out if your employer will allow for more flexible hours so you can circumvent, and not contribute to, the rush-hour crush. (During the 1918 flu pandemic, the health commissioner directed New York businesses to stagger commutes by just 15 minutes to reduce crowds on transit and at office buildings.)

Continue to work remotely if you can to reduce crowding for essential workers and others who are obligated to commute. And if you're planning to take public transit to run errands or socialize, or for any other nonwork-related purpose, travel during off-peak hours.



Mark Wickens for The New York Times

Avoid touching communal surfaces.

Keep your hands off the subway poles and rails to the ferry deck or onto the bus. Don't touch the turnstile as you move through it; stay away from touch screens, keypads and elevator buttons. Make contactless payments if they're offered, and skip the paper tickets.

Though surface contamination is not the main way people contract Covid-19, Dr. Benjamin nevertheless recommended washing your hands before departing on your journey and again upon reaching your destination, in addition to sanitizing frequently throughout. Think, too, about skipping the gloves, which can pick up germs on one surface and spread them to another.

Follow the directions.

Take note of the decals on the floor and signs you may see shepherding you through the station, an effort by some operators — like the Chicago Transit Authority — to reduce the number of people crossing paths and decrease crowding. Riders should be “spreading ourselves out still so we're not packed in like sardines,” as Dr. Gershon put it, including spacing out along the subway platform.

If you're driving onto the ferry, the Washington State Department of Transportation, which manages the largest ferry system in the United States, recommends remaining in your car for the duration of your trip. And if you're boarding the bus, enter from the rear, to avoid shedding respiratory droplets on the driver and other passengers. Many bus systems, including those in Philadelphia and Minneapolis, have been encouraging passengers to enter from the back for that precise reason.

Don't eat, and keep the volume down.

It might already be an unspoken norm on public transit, but it's a good public health practice, too: Don't eat onboard, as eating can carry particles from a surface to your face. “Once you've gotten into a public setting, no matter how well sanitized you are, we're touching things,” Dr. Mohanraj said. “You're risking putting whatever's on your hand in contact with your mouth, your nose, your eyes.” Besides, you'd have to take off your mask.

Avoid extensive conversations, too; talking, and singing, sprays aerosolized droplets that can carry virus particles. In Tokyo, many riders were already accustomed to wearing masks and rarely talking; these practices became universal with the pandemic's onset.

And most of all, respect your transit operator. Bus drivers, for example, have been verbally and physically assaulted for enforcing mask rules. “It's just unconscionable,” Dr. Gershon said. “Nobody should have to be afraid to go to work.”

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