

Maharashtra amends health rules, drops RT-PCR test for vaccinated arrivals

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Maharashtra government has dropped the requirement of a reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test for fully vaccinated domestic air travellers in its new guidelines issued on Thursday.

The state has also decided to restrict the mandatory seven-day institutional quarantine for passengers from three countries — Botswana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

The change in guidelines comes close on the heels of the Union health ministry's nudge asking the state to align its policies with those of the Centre's. Other issues like non-availability of enough hotel rooms for quarantining passengers from 11 "at-risk" countries/regions, including those from Europe, may have also influenced the decision.

In its new guidelines, the state has categorised the three African countries as "high risk". All such passengers coming from the three high-risk countries will have to undergo an RT-PCR test on arrival, mandatory seven-day institutional quarantine, and a second RT-PCR after seven days. In case of a negative result, such passengers will have to undergo another seven days of home quarantine. This rule will also apply to those who travelled to the three countries in the past 15 days.

The government has also decided to do away with a compulsory RT-PCR test for vaccinated domestic travelers, bringing relief to airlines and travel companies. "In the case of domestic air travel, passengers will either have to be fully vaccinated or compulsorily carry a RT-PCR test certificate showing negative result within 72 hours of boarding," read the order issued by Chief Secretary Debashish Chakrabarty.

In his letter to the Maharashtra government on Wednesday, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan has flagged differences between the central and state rules. Bhushan said Maharashtra's rules were in divergence with the standard operating procedures and guidelines issued by the health ministry and urged the state to rethink, so as to ensure uniform implementation of guidelines across the country.

Civic and state officials gathered on Wednesday afternoon to review the earlier guidelines, following the central advisory. A section of civic officials suggested it would be easier to implement the central guidelines as that would make tracking and tracing of symptomatic passengers simpler.

The possibility of passengers travelling from Europe to Mumbai via Delhi or Bengaluru to skip mandatory institutional quarantine was also discussed. On the other hand, those pitching for stricter measures pointed out that the state may again have to enforce lockdown in case of rapid growth of Covid cases. It was also suggested that there may not be enough hotel rooms available for isolating all passengers, given the travel demand, wedding season, and events in the city.

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