

U.S. CDC eases travel recommendations on some 110 countries, territories including Japan

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The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has eased travel recommendations for more than 110 countries and territories, including Japan just ahead of the Olympics.

The CDC's new ratings, first reported by Reuters and posted on a CDC website on Monday, include 61 nations that were lowered from its highest "Level 4" rating that discouraged all travel to recommending travel for fully vaccinated individuals, the agency confirmed on Tuesday.

An additional 50 countries and territories have been lowered to "Level 2" or "Level 1," a CDC spokeswoman said. Countries ranked lowest for COVID-19 risks now include Singapore, Israel, South Korea, Iceland, Belize and Albania.

Among those now listed at "Level 3," are France, Ecuador, the Philippines, South Africa, Canada, Mexico, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, Honduras, Hungary and Italy.

The U.S. State Department said it had updated its recommendations to reflect the recent methodology update, but noted not all ratings were revised because of other factors including "commercial flight availability, restrictions on U.S. citizen entry, and impediments to obtaining COVID test results within three calendar days."

The State Department eased its ratings on 85 countries and territories, including Japan.

On May 24, the State Department had urged against travel to Japan, citing a new wave of coronavirus cases before the Tokyo Olympics are set to begin on July 23.

The State Department warning raised concerns and prompted the White House to reaffirm its support for Tokyo's plan to hold the Games this summer and for U.S. athletes competing there despite a new wave of infections and a low vaccination rate in the host country.

Foreign spectators have been banned, and organizers are expected to make a decision late this month on domestic spectators.

REVISED CRITERIA

The CDC said the change came after it revised its criteria for travel health notices. The CDC said it also revised its rating for the United States to “Level 3” from “Level 4.”

The agency said the new criteria for a Level 4 “avoid all travel” recommendation has changed to 500 cases per 100,000 from 100 COVID-19 cases per 100,000.

The agency added that many countries have lower ratings “because of the criteria changes or because their outbreaks are better controlled.” The CDC said it expects more countries to get lower, more favorable travel ratings.

Other countries being lowered to “Level 3” include Honduras, Indonesia, Jordan, Libya, Panama, Poland, Denmark and Malaysia.

Many of the countries that now have lower ratings remain on the U.S. government’s list of countries subject to severe travel restrictions – and most have been subject to the restrictions since early 2020.

The United States bars nearly all non-U.S. citizens who have within the previous 14 days been to China, the United Kingdom, Ireland, India, South Africa, Brazil, Iran and the 26 Schengen nations in Europe without border controls.

Asked why the United States is maintaining the restrictions even though some countries that now have low infection rates are subject to them, while others with high rates are exempt, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said on Tuesday the issue was subject to “an interagency conversation, and we are looking at the data in real time as to how we should move forward with that.”

Reuters **reported** on Tuesday the Biden administration is forming expert working groups with Canada, Mexico, the European Union and the UK to determine how best to restart travel safely after 15 months of pandemic restrictions, citing a White House official.

By David Shepardson www.reuters.com

