

BUSINESS

The hottest hotel amenity? Virus-scrubbed air

By Elaine Glusac
NEW YORK TIMES

When the coronavirus first hit, hotels quickly adopted enhanced cleaning polices, including germ-killing electrostatic spraying and ultraviolet light exposure in guest rooms and public areas.

But as research on virus spread has shifted focus from surface contact to airborne transmission, some hotels and cruise ships are scrubbing the very air travelers breathe with a variety of air filtration and treatment systems.

“The best amenity that any hotel could provide under those circumstances is safety, especially in the air,” said Carlos Sarmiento, the general manager of the Hotel Paso del Norte in El Paso. The 1912 vintage hotel recently reopened after a four-year renovation that included installing a new air purification system called Plasma Air that emits charged ions intended to neutralize the virus and make particles easier to filter out.

With the new air-scrubbing campaigns, hotels are following airlines, many of which have hospital-grade, high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters that are said to be over 99 percent effective in capturing tiny virus particles, including the coronavirus.

Hotels and cruise ships can more easily ensure social distancing than airplanes, but, given the recent research on the importance of enhanced air filtration, some are adding air-cleaning dimensions to their heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, which already aim to remove dust, smoke, odors and allergens.

How air is purified

Researchers, including those at Tulane University, have found that the tiny aerosol particles of SARS-CoV-2 that are emitted when someone with the virus speaks or breathes can remain in the air for up to 16 hours.



Tom Grillo / New York Times

State-of-the-art filtration systems claim to tackle the virus where it is believed to pose the most risk.

Along with social distancing, mask wearing is the first line of defense against breathing contaminated air indoors, said Dr. Philip M. Tierno Jr., a professor of microbiology and pathology at New York University School of Medicine, who has consulted with HVAC companies.

“HVAC systems are of great significance in reducing the amount of airborne particles since this virus can be spread in an airborne fashion,” he added, calling the tiniest aerosols “the most dangerous.”

There are several ways to remove these particles, he explained, including fresh-air ventilation, which dilutes the pathogens.

Air cleaning technologies include bipolar ionization systems, which, according to their manu-

facturers, send charged ions out on air currents that damage the surface of the virus and inactivate it. They may also bind with the virus aerosols, causing them to fall or be more easily filtered out.

Some antiviral HVAC systems feature germicidal ultraviolet light in the ductwork (the Food and Drug Administration states that ultraviolet-C lamps have been shown to inactivate the virus).

Systems often use a combination of these technologies with efficient air filters that remove contaminants. Filters with Minimum Efficiency Reporting Values (MERV) of 13 or higher are best at capturing the coronavirus, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

“In a transient environment, like a hotel, motel or dormitory, you don’t know who was there

before you and what their health was,” said Wes Davis, the director of technical services with the Air Conditioning Contractors of America, a trade association, adding that good housekeeping is a top priority in such places. “As for the other items like ultraviolet exposure or ionization, every little bit helps, but I’m not quite sure any of them is the perfect solution. It’s more like a concert.”

From property-wide to portable

Throughout the summer, the Madison Beach Hotel, part of Hilton’s Curio Collection of hotels, in Madison, Conn., used its outdoor spaces for dining and even holding meetings in tents. But with the approach of cold weather, HVAC contractors installed an air purification system

that uses UV light and ionized hydrogen peroxide in most public areas of the hotel, including the indoor restaurant and meeting rooms. Spa treatment rooms each have their own portable air purification systems.

But many hotels are bringing units into the guest rooms for extra assurance. In Rhode Island, rooms at the Weekapaug Inn and Ocean House hotel, both run by Ocean House Management, have Molekule air purifiers that destroy pollutants and viruses at a rate above 99 percent, according to the independent testing group Aerosol Research and Engineering Laboratories.

Larger units were recently added to restaurants and public spaces, and the portable units have become a top seller, starting at around \$500, in Ocean House’s gift shop.

Attempting to breathe easy on cruise ships

Some health experts think that upgraded air filtration could help the challenges faced by the cruise industry. Adopting systems that are “aimed at reducing occupant exposure to infectious droplets/aerosols,” and upgrading HVAC systems with MERV 13 filters were among 74 critical recommendations to ship lines made by the Healthy Sail Panel, a group of public health experts assembled by Royal Caribbean Group and Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings in September.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintains that ships remain vulnerable to spreading infection based on population density and the inability of crew in particular to maintain social distance in their workspaces and living quarters. Still, cruising is expected to resume in U.S. waters for ships carrying 250 or more passengers and crew in the first half of 2021, pending certification under the CDC’s Framework for Conditional Sailing Order.

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doses of the vaccine, which is still undergoing clinical trials.

So far, Pfizer estimates that 50 million doses will be manufactured by the end of the year. The first batches will likely go to health care workers, other essential employees, people 65 and over and people at highest risk for severe illness or death from COVID-19.

Yes, vaccines usually take a long time to develop – about 10 years, if you ask the epidemiologists who develop them. Scientists are developing COVID-19 vaccines more quickly because of Operation Warp Speed, a federal partnership aimed at developing 300 million doses that dangles a \$1.95 billion paycheck in front of companies who can deliver the first 100 million doses.

Private insurers and Medicare will be responsible for covering the full cost of the vaccine, the Chronicle’s Julia Garcia reports.

Once a vaccine becomes widely available, can my workplace force me to get it?

“Force” is a strong word, right? But legal experts say there are no laws prohibiting companies from requiring their workers to be vaccinated. There may even be some precedent; universities, for example, may ask students to provide proof of certain vaccinations before enrolling in classes.

“That’s the \$64,000 question,” said Mike Muskat, a partner at the Houston employment law firm Muskat, Mahony & Devine.

Muskat said that employers may look to the Americans with Disabilities Act for guidance on whether they can require a COVID-19 vaccine for work. If they ask for an immunization record confirming the worker has been vaccinated against the new coronavirus, it could count as a medical examination – legally permissible if the

employer can prove it’s a business necessity.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which enforces civil rights laws in the workplace, might also provide some insight into what can and can’t be required. The federal agency said as recently as September that a workplace may administer COVID-19 test and screenings as long as it’s consistent with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance.

It’s more likely, Muskat said, that employers will merely encourage people to check out the background of the vaccine and consider getting shots. Ensuring 100 percent compliance with a workplace rule might be impossible.

Regulatory bodies like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration haven’t put out any regulations for vaccine compliance yet, said Dr. David Levy, CEO of EHE Health, a national primary care organization.

“Some employers might feel that there’s liability if you push too hard,” Levy said.

Could a prospective employer require it in a job application?

It’s possible, said Richard Carlson, an employment law professor at South Texas College of Law.

“You’ll start seeing employers provide advanced warning upfront as part of the job description,” Carlson said.

While a workplace can’t discriminate while hiring on basis of whether the applicant has received the COVID-19 vaccine, it might signal to workers that if they want to get a job, it’d be a good idea to have immunization.

Some industries, such as health care, are more likely to require vaccination.

“When it comes to getting a vaccination to safely perform a job, such as working in retail when dealing with customers, it’s likely to be essential to perform that job safely

without endangering other people,” Carlson said.

Will I have to get vaccinated to travel for work?

Other countries may very well put in travel laws requiring visitors from foreign countries to show proof of a COVID-19 vaccine. For instance, people traveling to Nigeria must provide yellow fever immunization records to enter the country, according to the CDC.

Dozens of countries have closed their borders to U.S. travelers during the pandemic, and many others require proof of a negative COVID-19 test before entry.

“I can easily imagine them saying, ‘Yeah, we’re going to open the borders, but you have to show proof of immunization,’” Levy said.

What if I have a religious exemption or a medical issue that prevents me from getting the vaccine?

There are auto-immune diseases may prevent people from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. Some people also cite religious exemptions in not getting vaccines.

“The employer’s duty to accommodate religious practices is minimal if the accommodation puts more than a *de minimis* burden on employer, meaning uses much cost or inconvenience to employer,” Carlson said.

But even religious exemptions aren’t always going to stand up in court. During the measles outbreaks in 2014 and 2015, California and New York legislators rescinded vaccine exemptions for non-medical reasons in an effort to lower transmission rates. (It’s TBD whether Texas would ever be one of those states.)

No state laws currently exist around COVID-19 immunizations, probably because the vaccine isn’t out for mass consumption yet. The jury’s still out on whether Texas will maintain its existing exemption laws, which allow both medical exemptions

But experts say that federal civil rights laws won’t protect political beliefs or skepticism about the safety of the vaccine as legitimate excuses not to get it.

“There will be a good argument that vaccines are reliable, helpful and consistent with business necessity such that employers will be able to require them with certain exceptions,” Muskat said.

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Marie D. De Jesús / Staff file photos

So far, Pfizer estimates that 50 million doses will be manufactured by the end of the year.



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