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Emerging from the Pandemic: Understanding the Canada-US land border requirements

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BORDER POLICY

RESEARCH INSTITUTE
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

EMERGING FROM THE PANDEMIC: UNDERSTANDING THE CANADA-US LAND BORDER REQUIREMENTS

CANADA-US LAND BORDER RESTRICTIONS: AN ABBREVIATED TIMELINE

March 21, 2020

Restrictions put in place

March - November 2020

Canada updates exemptions and quarantine rules

February 2021

Canada extends test requirement to land border

July 2021

Canada exempts vaccinated Canadians from quarantine

August 2021

Canada allows entry for vaccinated Americans with a negative COVID test

November 2021

US allows entry for vaccinated Canadians via land and ferries

INTRODUCTION

The restrictions on 'non-essential' travel at land and ferry crossings enacted by Canada and the United States in March 2020 remained largely unchanged for over a year (see sidebar).¹ During the first fifteen months of the restrictions, Canada implemented some exemptions for family members and compassionate reasons and changed some entry requirements, while the US restrictions remained intact. After an unprecedented period of a heavily restricted land border, Canada began to ease restrictions for fully vaccinated US travelers in August 2021, with the US following in November. However, much like the restrictions themselves, definitions and requirements vary by country (and for the US, by mode).

Because so many travelers crossing the border are doing so in both directions, the discrepancy between Canadian and US requirements will cause confusion and delays at the border, unless travelers are well educated about what is required by both countries. Canadian entry requirements have already resulted in confusion for travelers, and this situation is likely to worsen when US land border restrictions ease and cross-border travel volumes increase. *This Border Brief is intended to provide clarity and guidance on the land border requirements for travelers crossing the Canada-US border, in both directions.*

Table 1 (next page) outlines the requirements as of November 2021 for passenger travel at land and ferry crossings. Although both countries require full vaccination, Canada has a testing requirement, as well as a digital platform for submitting test results, proof of vaccine, and additional information such as a quarantine plan. There is no testing requirement at the US land border, nor is there a digital platform for sharing proof of vaccination. It is important to note that the US and Canadian restrictions on non-essential travel are still in place but are modified based on vaccination status. For example, an American who wants to travel to Canada for a 'non-essential' purpose will be denied entry if they are not fully vaccinated and tested. An unvaccinated Canadian returning home is still subject to the Federal Quarantine Act and will need to quarantine for 2 weeks. Likewise, an unvaccinated Canadian seeking to cross the land border into the US for a 'non-essential' reason will be denied entry.

TABLE 1: BORDER REQUIREMENTS FOR TRAVEL CONSIDERED 'NON-ESSENTIAL'²

	ENTRY TO CANADA ³		ENTRY TO UNITED STATES ⁴	
	AIR, LAND, & FERRY		LAND & FERRY	AIR ⁵
TEST REQUIREMENTS⁶				
Negative PCR Test (or equivalent) ⁷	Required for all travelers over age 5 within 72 hours of entry (children under 5 exempt from test requirements)		Not required	Accepted but not required
Negative Antigen Test	Not accepted		Not required	Required within 72 hours of entry for vaccinated travelers Required within 24 hours of entry for unvaccinated Americans No testing required for travelers under age 2
VACCINATION REQUIREMENTS & PROTOCOLS				
Full vaccination minimum age requirement ⁸	Age 12		Age 18	
Protocol for unvaccinated	Health precautions, including limited contact for 14 days ⁹ Additional testing upon and after arrival for those age 5-12		Recommendations for testing, self-monitoring and self-isolation after arrival	
CITIZENSHIP				
Testing requirements	Testing requirements apply regardless of citizenship or country of origin		Not required	Testing requirements apply regardless of citizenship or country of origin
Vaccination requirements	Vaccination requirements apply regardless of citizenship or country of origin		Vaccination requirements apply to foreign nationals	
BORDER PROCESS				
	ArriveCan platform for online/app-based submission of test results, vaccination status, quarantine plan, etc.		Verbal attestation of vaccination status, with ability to show proof of vaccination	Proof of vaccine and test results shared with airline prior to travel

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US AND CANADIAN TEST REQUIREMENTS?

The US and Canada have different test requirements, which vary by type of test, mode of travel, and by cohort. Understanding these requirements can be confusing for travelers crossing the border in both directions, particularly for those with young children. For example, an American family driving to Canada will need to have everyone over age 5 tested, but no tests will be required when they drive back to the US. A Canadian family driving to the US does not need any test results but will need them for everyone over age 5 to return to Canada.

As Table 1 illustrates, a rapid antigen test is required for air travel to the US for all travelers over age 2, but no test is required for land or ferry crossings. Canada requires a PCR test (or equivalent) for travelers over age 5 regardless of mode. Compared to a rapid antigen test, a PCR test is more costly and the results have a longer turnaround time.

Both countries require that tests be taken within 72 hours¹⁰ and accept proof of a previous COVID-19 infection (a positive test result) within varying time frames in lieu of a negative test. Both countries also have numerous exemptions to these requirements for different categories of travelers.¹¹

BORDER RECOVERY

Unlike the coordinated border security approach measures taken in the aftermath of 9/11, border management emerging from the pandemic looks very different for Canada and the US. The ArriveCAN platform, first implemented in February 2021, is fully integrated into border processing, across modes. The US, at the time of writing, has chosen not to develop a digital platform for submission of health-related data at the land border, and opted instead for a verbal attestation model.¹² Travelers are asked by the officer in the booth if they are fully vaccinated and will be referred to secondary inspection if suspected otherwise.

The Canadian test requirement is an ongoing impediment to full border recovery, particularly for travel across the land border, which is typically undertaken for shorter duration than air travel. Many have argued that the PCR test is an unnecessary burden for fully vaccinated travelers.¹³ At a cost of roughly \$150 USD, and a 72-hour window to get results, Canada's requirement for a PCR test is likely to suppress cross-border travel. In addition, unvaccinated children under age 12 are subject to restricted mobility and self-isolation upon returning to Canada, making cross-border travel for families very costly and very difficult.

WHAT ABOUT AIR TRAVEL TO THE US?

The US border restrictions on 'non-essential' travel were only implemented for land and ferry crossings, while air travel was restricted not by trip purpose, but by country of origin.¹⁴ Canadians, for example, have been able to fly to the US throughout the pandemic, with only a negative antigen test regardless of trip purpose. Residents of the European Union, however, have been banned.¹⁵ The US revoked country-specific travel bans in November 2021, in favor of a system that restricts travel based on vaccination status.¹⁶ This requirement applies to most non-citizens and non-immigrants who are visiting the US temporarily. Therefore, Canadians flying to the US must now submit proof of full vaccination in addition to a negative antigen test. Proof of vaccination does not apply to US citizens, nationals, or permanent residents. However, unvaccinated Americans flying home are now subject to a 24-hour test requirement rather than a 72-hour window for vaccinated travelers. Vaccine and test records can be shared electronically with airlines, prior to departure.

Throughout the pandemic, travel considered 'essential' has been allowed across the border. At the land border, no additional health documentation has been required in either direction, although essential travelers must use ArriveCAN for entries to Canada. However, US requirements for 'essential' travel will change in January 2022. At that point, all foreign nationals seeking to enter the US via land or ferry crossings must be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 regardless of trip purpose. Some fear the vaccination requirement, particularly for truck drivers, may place additional strain on supply chains that are already overwhelmed.

We have yet to transition to a 'post-pandemic' border crossing environment, but if pre-pandemic travel volumes are ever to return, crossing the Canada – US border will eventually need to be less confusing, costly, and time-consuming. Streamlining the process does not necessarily pose an increased risk to public health but does require a transition from a zero-risk approach to a risk-management one. It also requires the US and Canada to return to a coordinated and interoperable approach to border management. This is important for businesses, communities, and loved ones whose everyday lives are impacted by border operations. In the short term, businesses that have catered to Canadians, particularly in communities adjacent to the border, will continue to be impacted disproportionately. Families, friends, and property owners who once enjoyed a quick and seamless border crossing experience, will continue to face uncertainty. It is the responsibility of border stakeholders, industry, and governments to alleviate these impacts, through innovation, communication, and collaboration.¹⁷

ENDNOTES

1. For a timeline of border restrictions and assessment of impacts on border regions, see "Border Barometer" (2021), https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri_publications/127.
2. In both the US and Canada, there are numerous exemptions for certain categories of travelers. For Canada's, see: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources/entering-canada-covid-19.html>. For US, see: <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/10/29/fact-sheet-guidance-travelers-enter-us-land-ports-entry-and-ferry-terminals>.
3. Canada's requirements apply to all modes of travel (i.e., air, land, and sea). The federal Quarantine Act still applies to Canadians who are not able to meet these requirements. See <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources/entering-canada-covid-19.html>.
4. See <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/10/29/fact-sheet-guidance-travelers-enter-us-land-ports-entry-and-ferry-terminals>.
5. See <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/ea/requirements-for-air-travelers-to-the-us.html>.
6. PCR tests are considered more thorough but are more costly and can take longer to get results. Rapid antigen tests are considered less accurate, but are less expensive and results are available more quickly.
7. Proof of a positive test taken within 14 to 180 days of arrival can substitute for the PCR test. In addition to PCR tests, Canada also accepts NAATs and RT-Lamp tests. See <https://travel.gc.ca/travel-covid/travel-restrictions/covid-vaccinated-travellers-entering-canada#pre-entry-test>. Tests taken within Canada for US travel are valid upon return if within the 72 hour window. Canada's test requirement does not currently apply to 'essential' travelers.
8. Individuals are considered fully vaccinated two weeks after the last dose. Combinations of different vaccines are allowed. See: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated-guidance.html#annex>.
9. See <https://travel.gc.ca/travel-covid/travel-restrictions/covid-vaccinated-travellers-entering-canada#children>.
10. The US requires unvaccinated US citizens and permanent residents to be tested within 24 hours of departure for air travel.
11. For Canada's exemptions to the test requirement, see <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/awareness-resources/entering-canada-covid-19.html>. For US, see <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/10/29/fact-sheet-guidance-travelers-enter-us-land-ports-entry-and-ferry-terminals>.
12. For more details on vaccine credentials and test requirements, see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/proof-of-vaccination.html>.
13. See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/land-border-united-states-1.6229392>.
14. For more on the US restrictions varying between land and air travel, see <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-u-s-border-closure-fly-travel-covid-19-1.5754763>.
15. The US previously restricted travel from a list of countries, including those in the EU, UK, Republic of Ireland, China, Iran, Brazil, India, and South Africa. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/from-other-countries.html>.
16. See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/10/25/a-proclamation-on-advancing-the-safe-resumption-of-global-travel-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.
17. For more on this see Woodrow Wilson Center report, "The U.S.-Canadian Border: Recovering from COVID-19," <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/us-canadian-border-recovery-covid-19>.

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