

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAVELERS COMING BACK FROM CHINA

RAG 02/01/2023

*DISCLAIMER: This document was prepared for the Risk Management Group meeting of 02/01/2023. Due to the very short deadline, no systematic literature review was attempted. In contrast, the document rather aims to provide an advice, and gives a broad overview of what is implemented (or not) in other countries.*

### CONTEXT

At the beginning of December 2022, China has lifted most of the sanitary measures in place regarding COVID-19, after almost three years of “zero-COVID” policy. Since then, and as expected, the number of COVID-19 cases has drastically increased. While there is in general a scarcity of data, the information from the field demonstrates the scale of this epidemic, with a significant overload of healthcare services. From January 8th 2023 onwards, China will lift its last measure and there won't be any mandatory quarantine for those entering in the country. The scale of this outbreak raises concern about importation of cases in Belgium and the potential arrival of new variants. However, we need to bear in mind that there is already circulation of SARS-CoV-2 in Belgium and impact has so far remained limited as the Belgian population presents a relatively strong immunity through previous infections and high vaccination coverage<sup>1</sup>. In the [RAG advice of December 21st 2022](#), the RAG recommends to **test symptomatic travelers coming back from China** in order to ensure active genomic surveillance for potential new variants from China.

Given the evolving epidemiological situation in China and the fact that other countries are modifying the (testing) strategy for travelers coming back from China, the RAG was asked to further evaluate the need for implementing additional testing measures for travelers from China.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- The situation in China is not unexpected and, at the present time, the immediate risk to the Belgian population is low. Therefore, there is no need for urgent measures.
- A **pre-departure negative test result** (RAT or RT-PCR, less than 48h before departure) for all travelers flying from China to Belgium (direct and indirect flights) could be an option in order to limit the viral transmission **only if this is part of a broader European approach** (cf. [general RAG advice on travelers of May 2022](#)).
- Genomic **surveillance** should be strengthened in order to ensure early detection of potential newly emerging variants:
  - **Travelers (≥6y) who develop COVID-like symptoms within one week after arrival from China** should get tested. This requires that testing is accessible and that

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<sup>1</sup> [Thematic report : \(sciensano.be\)](#)

recommendations and practical information are clearly given. In case of a positive test result:

- the sample should be sent for **sequencing**. It is noted that some RATs are also suitable for sequencing. Further operational recommendations fall outside of the scope of this advice.
- travelers (like all Belgian citizens) are recommended to respect 7 days of isolation ([RAG advice September 30th 2022](#)), mask wearing and basic hygienic measures
- **Genomic surveillance of wastewater** from septic tanks of planes coming back from China should be implemented.

## ELEMENTS OF DISCUSSION

- China has just lifted the restrictive measures in place after almost three years of zero-COVID policy, which is currently leading to a severe outbreak of COVID-19. One of the reasons is that the Chinese population presents a lower immunity against the virus by its lower vaccination coverage, especially for booster doses and with less effective vaccines and lower natural immunity acquired through previous infections, compared to the Belgian population.
- Genomic data from China is lacking and it is important to closely follow-up the situation, as the intense circulation and high absolute case numbers may favor the development of new variants in China. Therefore, **enhancing active genomic surveillance among travelers from China** will enable us to monitor which variant is currently circulating and whether it could cause a risk in Belgium.
- The previous RAG advice ([RAG advice on testing strategy for travelers](#), May 12<sup>th</sup> 2022), noted that **testing before departure** (RAT or RT-PCR) has the added benefit of lowering the risk of in-flight transmission. Moreover, pre-departure testing is, from a Belgian point of view, logistically fairly easy to implement. Rapid antigen tests could serve as a suitable and at times better alternative to RT-PCR<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, travelers often arrive after an international lay-over, might travel through other European hubs (e.g. Schiphol, Frankfurt), or might have a false-negative test, so pre-departure testing is by no means a guarantee to prevent importation of cases.
- Previous experiences with travel restrictions and measures for travelers have shown that import can at best be delayed.
- The [RAG advice of December 21th](#) has recommended to test only the symptomatic travelers coming back from China (from direct and indirect flights) should get tested. Testing symptomatic travelers by RAT is an appropriate alternative to RT-PCR to detect potential COVID-19 cases<sup>2,3</sup>. Therefore, travelers from China presenting COVID-like symptoms within one week after arrival must have easy access to testing (RAT or RT-PCR). In case of a

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<sup>2</sup> [Performance of SARS-CoV-2 rapid antigen test compared with real-time RT-PCR in asymptomatic individuals - ScienceDirect](#)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cochrane.org/CD013705/INFECTN\\_how-accurate-are-rapid-antigen-tests-diagnosing-covid-19](https://www.cochrane.org/CD013705/INFECTN_how-accurate-are-rapid-antigen-tests-diagnosing-covid-19)

positive test result, the sample should be sent for sequencing, which can be done on a RT-PCR sample or through NGS on the nitrocellulose strip of antigen test (RAT)<sup>4</sup>.

- The goal of testing symptomatic travelers returning from China is to be able to monitor the situation, in combination with international data. Therefore, we should aim at an improvement of the situation, not at a 100% testing of all passengers.
- Testing of all arriving passengers (symptomatic and asymptomatic) from China is not recommended as the cost/benefit balance seems unfavorable.
- As also mentioned in the [RAG advice on testing strategy and quarantine for travelers](#), May 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, **in case of a VOC**, more general measures should be implemented, to effectively slow down the introduction of new VOCs in Belgium.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Testing strategy in other countries

- Italy:

Italy has recently implement testing measures with an obligation to (1) present a negative test result (swab molecular test or a swab antigenic test) in the 72 hours or in the 48 hours, respectively, preceding entry into the territory national territory, (2) undergo a rapid antigenic test at arrival (or within the 48h after the arrival), (3) in case of positive RAT result, to undergo immediate molecular test for sequencing and (4) to respect isolation measures (with negative molecular test results to end the isolation period). The ratio of passengers who tested positive on the first flight to Malpensa, Milan, from China, exceeded 50 % according to Lombardy's health chief Guido Bertolaso.

- Spain:

The Spanish government has just recently announced that they will reinforce the control in the airports for the travelers coming back from China, asking them a proof of negative COVID-19 test result or a proof of completed scheme of vaccination. No information on the date of application has been yet shared.

- Netherlands:

The Netherlands will provide post-arrival rapid tests to travelers coming back from China with additional information but travelers remain free to refuse to take the test.

- UK:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35134077/>

From 5 January, people flying from mainland China to England will be asked to take a pre-departure test before travel. A sample of people arriving in England from mainland China will be tested for COVID-19 to monitor for new variants.

- Japan:

From December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Japan will require all travelers and returnees who have stayed in China (except Hong Kong and Macau) within 7 days prior to the entry and all travelers and returnees coming from China (except Hong Kong and Macau) by direct flight to take on-arrival test at the quarantine station.

- India:

International passengers travelling from China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand to India will be mandatorily required to undergo RT-PCR tests before their departure from these countries/destinations and upload the COVID negative RT-PCR test report on Air Suvudha portal from January 1, 2023. The test should have been conducted within 72 hours of the journey to India.

- South Korea:

All passengers from China will need to present a negative PCR test result (less than 48h before departure) and perform a RAT test at arrival.

- USA:

The United States will require all travelers from China to show a negative Covid-19 test result before flying to the country. Passengers flying to the US from China will need to get a test no more than two days before flying, and present proof of the negative test to their airline before boarding. The tests can be either a PCR test or an antigen self-test administered through a telehealth service.

### International recommendations

- [ECDC](#):

No clear and homogeneous recommendations have yet been made at the EU level. ECDC mentioned that “.. given the higher population immunity in the EU/EEA, as well as the prior emergence and subsequent replacement of variants currently circulating in China by other Omicron sub-lineages in the EU/EEA, a surge in cases in China is not expected to impact the COVID-19 epidemiological situation in the EU/EEA”.

- [CDC](#):

From January 5<sup>th</sup> onwards, all air passengers two years and older originating from China will be required to get a test (such as a PCR test or an antigen self-test administered and monitored by a telehealth service or a licensed provider and authorized by the Food and Drug Administration or the relevant national authority) no more than 2 days before their departure from China, Hong Kong, or Macau, and show a negative test result to the airline upon departure.

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