

Airliners an 'invitation to flu infection'

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Travelling in the confined space of a commercial airliner is an easy way to spread swine flu and might potentially put 500,000 people at risk at any one time. World Health Organisation spokesman Peter Cordingley has warned.

With memories still fresh of people wearing masks during the Sars outbreak in 2003, jittery passengers are getting increasingly phobic about being in close contact with strangers. Many airlines have cut the frequency of flights on some routes amid the global downturn, meaning more packed planes, even in business and first class.

Some travellers appear to be taking matters into their own hands and flying by private jet. According to Justin Lee Firestone, chief executive of Asia Jet, daily inquiries about its private jet service have surged by 40 per cent in the past two days.

"This is not about more people wanting to be uber flashy," Mr Firestone said. "The private jet is a controlled environment. You know who your colleagues are."

Most of the inquiries were from within Asia, he said. However, at US\$5,900 an hour, flying by Asia Jet is not for everyone.

Most people have no choice but to fly commercial airlines, where they eat and sleep next to one another and often share armrests and toilet facilities.

Alan Sihoe, a surgeon at Queen Mary Hospital, said: "At this stage, face masks may not help much

Seat upgrade Interest in private jets has surged with the onset of swine flu

According to the chief executive of Asia Jet, inquiries are up.

40%

because swine flu is not spread by people breathing or by air."

He recommended people use alcohol hand rubs to maintain a high level of personal hygiene.

During the Sars outbreak, Cathay Pacific sought to reassure passengers by claiming the airline's cabin air was safer than that of office buildings since "the entire cabin air volume is exchanged every three to five minutes. By comparison, commercial buildings only offer 15 per cent fresh air, mixed with recycled air, at any given moment".

In modern planes, cabin air is a combination of pressurised air from outside and filtered air from inside. The air flows in a circular pattern from overhead ducts to floor grilles.

Coughing was a common symptom of Sars and helped it spread quickly. The most common way swine flu spreads is by water droplets from people coughing or sneezing.