



USA TODAY TRAVEL

Don't want to fly during coronavirus crisis? Don't rush to cancel that ticket. Here's why

[Dawn Gilbertson](#) | USA TODAY Updated 1:59 p.m. EDT Mar. 23, 2020

The surge of passengers trying to change or cancel plane tickets as [travel grinds to a halt](#) during the [coronavirus crisis](#) is overwhelming airline and online travel agency reservation centers.

Hours-long waits, dropped calls and don't-call-us-we'll-call-you messages are the norm. Airlines have taken to their websites, Facebook and Twitter accounts to advise travelers to hold off on calling unless their plans are in the next few days.

Travelers who heed the advice might see an unexpected benefit: a refund.

Since the [coronavirus outbreak](#) began, all major airlines have added a variety of [waivers](#) to allow travelers to change or cancel upcoming flights without fees that generally start at \$200 a person. What the waivers don't allow, at least for nonrefundable tickets: a refund, which has confused, surprised and infuriated travelers.

The only way to snag a refund is to plead your case with a sympathetic airline representative – or have your flight canceled.

When airlines cancel a flight, whether because of a coronavirus public health emergency, a winter storm, a hurricane or a mechanical issue, passengers are eligible for a refund even if they have a nonrefundable ticket, including those restrictive basic economy tickets. Airlines don't always broadcast this option, preferring to rebook a passenger or issue a credit so they retain the revenue.

What does this mean for travelers who don't want to travel during the coronavirus outbreak?

Airlines have canceled flights in droves to cope with a crushing decline in demand, and the flight cuts get steeper by the day. Delta Airlines is slashing 70% of its flights as it [draws down its operation](#) until travel demand returns.

That means travelers due to fly Delta over the next few months may see their flights canceled.

The story is the same at all [U.S. airlines](#), and there have been even deeper cuts by foreign carriers.

"In those situations, you would get a full refund in cash rather than travel credit," said Scott Keyes, founder of travel deals service Scott's Cheap Flights. "But if you have already processed your cancellation and gotten a travel credit, you might not be able to go back and ask for cash instead."

Keyes got a lot of questions about how to get a refund instead of a travel credit, so he offered tips in a [Twitter thread](#) Tuesday.

Scott here. I've gotten a lot of questions about when to cancel flights you've already booked in order to get a refund.

Here's when you should cancel, and when you should wait:

"There's no harm in waiting it out in the hopes that they do cancel it," Keyes said in an interview.

Keyes has a few upcoming flights he's monitoring for cancellations, including a flight to Philadelphia at the end of March and a trip to Europe in July.

"If they don't (cancel), I'll just end up taking the travel credit," he said.

How long should you wait to cancel in hopes of getting a refund?

Keyes recommends canceling a few days before your scheduled flight to allow time to reach airlines or travel agencies if needed. (Airlines tell passengers not to call unless their travel is in the next 72 hours.)

That might cut it too close for infrequent travelers worried the value of their ticket will evaporate if they can't get through and don't cancel before the flight departs.

Airlines generally have policies that changes or cancellations have to be made before the flight departs, but some are more flexible, given the crush of cancellation and change requests. Delta says on its [website](#) that "even if you're not able to reach us before your departure and don't take

your flight, all changes will be processed, and your ticket number automatically becomes an unused eCredit within 24 hours."

American's [website](#) says, "If you're scheduled to travel before March 31, 2020, but can't get through to reservations, we will honor all changes and the value of your ticket if you don't take your flight as planned."

Southwest Airlines' [no-show policy](#) voids the value of a ticket if travelers don't cancel at least 10 minutes before their flight is scheduled to depart.

Bottom line: If you don't want to play "Will they cancel my flight and give me a refund?" roulette, cancel the ticket online now or through reservations (when you get through), bank the travel credit and move on.

Be sure to save your confirmation number, ticket number and other relevant information, so it's available when you cash it in for a future flight.

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