

The Befogged COVID-19 Pass: What Exactly Does It Mean for You?

The COVID-19 pandemic has not ended; and it may for several years. Variants continue to emerge and change through mutation.

Like branches on active plants, each mutation differs from other variations. Each variant may cause severe illness but can readily succumb to an effective vaccine.

Public health authorities recommend that all eligible individuals be vaccinated; each person who is vaccinated receives a small COVID-19 vaccination record card or similar document. The card includes limited information, including the name and date of birth of the person vaccinated, the name of the vaccine, the date or dates of the vaccinations and the name of the healthcare professional who gave the shot(s), and/or the name of the site where the shots were administered. The card meets the requirements of a certificate.

A certificate states an official fact or shows completion of a program; a vaccine certificate theoretically attests to the truth of a vaccination or series of vaccinations. The limited information included on the COVID-19 vaccination record card and similar documents, however, may themselves require verification of their legitimacy. The verification process can become complicated and lengthy; the creation of alternatives to the certificate concept seems worthwhile. One alternative commonly mentioned is the "Vaccine passport."

A particular government issues a passport to a citizen of that country, identifying the holder of the document. The passport enables the citizen to travel to and from foreign countries under the protection of his/her country of citizenship. No

vaccine passport can function independent of a government passport. It can only verify that an individual entering a foreign country with a valid passport will not, or at least should not, become a public charge for health reasons.

Several countries are issuing or are planning to issue documents they label "COVID-19 passports." The partial list includes these countries: Austria, Bahrain, Barbados, China, El Salvador and France. As of July 1, the European Union (EU) offers its citizens and residents as well as certain categories of travelers from non-EU countries COVID-19 passports.

But the United States has decided against the development of a similar passport. The White House has said that citizens' privacy and rights supersede government issuance of such documents. Private companies are designing appropriate programs.

The IBM Digital Health Pass and IATA Travel Pass Initiative represent private programs created to issue digital health or travel passes. The Digital Health Pass affords a secured, digital substitute for paper vaccination cards or test results. The digital wallet the pass offers allows individuals to keep control of their personal health information and determine with whom and what information they might wish to share.

The IATA Pass is a mobile app. It informs travelers about what tests, vaccines and information they need before they begin their journeys and allows them to store and manage their verified certifications for COVID-19 in a private, safe environment. A passenger can download the Pass app on the Apple Store and Google Play if the airline on which she/he plans to travel is participating in one of the program trials now under way.

Slowly, terms like "certificate" and "pass" are replacing the

word “passport” in reference to COVID-19 documents. A passport certifies the personal identity and nationality of the holder. It also shows the full name, place and date of birth and a photograph of the possessor of the document. Today, many countries are issuing biometric passports with imbedded microchips. Machines readily read such passports, which discourage efforts at counterfeit.

A certificate states an official fact or indicates the completion of a program. It is quite specific and may include a microchip. Like a passport, it can be readily digitized, but its purpose differs from that of a passport.

Use of the phrase “COVID-19 passport” does both the term “passport” and the term “certificate” an injustice. The word “pass” seems more appropriate, simply because it allows a vaccinated individual to proceed beyond many of the pandemic restrictions.

A COVID-19 pass represents one smart way to return to society and social interaction. It can help reduce the personal barriers related to the global pandemic, but it cannot abate the national and international politics inherent in its possession and use.

Certain groups in the United States refuse or are reluctant to submit to the required vaccinations, contending the vaccinations impinge on their privacy. Several states have banned vaccination requirements. The U.S. government has decided against issuing vaccine passports.

Beyond the borders of the United States, the issue over the document known as the “COVID-19 passport/certificate/pass” has evoked concerns and political debate. Some authorities contend that the document provides greater freedom for those individuals who have recovered from COVID-19 and might encourage a noncarrier to make an attempt to catch the virus.

Certain people might be incentivized to falsify papers or buy

fake reports for presentation to authorities. Politicians in some countries will prove to be more slow-footed than politicians in other countries about developing an acceptable certificate or pass. The prevalence of a pass could easily threaten individual privacy. Relations between and among nations could affect the effectiveness of a certificate or pass.

Vaccine certificates/passes should be available to all eligible individuals who want and need them. They should not permit or encourage discrimination against the poor or minorities and should reflect personal and government honesty.
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