

How has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Travelers and Tourist Destinations?

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ABSTRACT

Currently, COVID-19 is prevalent, prompting both economic and infectious disease countermeasures in Japan. In particular, the Japanese tourism industry has been economically depressed. As a countermeasure, the Government of Japan launched a campaign to encourage people to travel in 2020. As a result of this campaign, the risk of infection in travelers increased, but that of residents in tourist destinations was less affected. Eventually, the economy of the tourism industry will be revitalized worldwide, but it is hoped that travelers will adopt more thorough infectious disease countermeasures.

Keywords: Infectious disease; Vaccination; COVID-19; Tourism

DESCRIPTION

Since the beginning of the global pandemic of COVID-19, from the viewpoint of social science, it has been necessary to consider countermeasures against not only infectious diseases but economic damage. First, regarding infectious disease countermeasures, most countries did not implement infection control measures at the same time. Individual countries implemented lockdown policies one by one in accordance with their respective epidemic situations. As a result, there were time lags between the peaks and convergence of epidemics among countries. Meanwhile, human transport had occurred between epidemic and non-epidemic areas. Looking at data on the WHO dashboard [1], we see slightly different epidemic peaks among countries, which suggest it is difficult to align the timing of countermeasures among them. As long as there are differences in the timing of epidemic peaks among countries, the COVID-19 pandemic may continue.

Next, what about the world economy? The main reasons for the economic crisis caused by the spread of infection are restrictions on communication between people, restrictions on travel and going out, and loss of interaction between people and goods. As long as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it will be necessary for countries to take economic measures to prevent weakness in their economy. According to the IMF, as of April 2020, the world had approved \$ 4.5 trillion in emergency measures.

Looking at the OECD data [2] as of August 2021, the economic growth forecast has been raised due to the expansion of vaccination, and fortunately, it is expected to show a recovery trend in the future.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, among developed countries, Japan had relatively low numbers of infected cases. Looking back on the epidemic, before the start of mass vaccination, Japan faced the difficult task of controlling COVID-19 with non-pharmaceutical intervention while at the same time revitalizing its economy. In Japan, there is no legal basis for a lockdown, so measures were taken to wear mask, wash hand and avoid 3Cs (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings), which depended on individuals' autonomy. As a result, the epidemic was suppressed in early summer of 2020. Then, the Government launched a "Go to Travel" campaign to revitalize the economy [3]. This was a measure to revitalize travel activity, to support the tourism industry, by providing financial assistance for people who planned a trip. As a result, as expected, the number of travelers increased significantly. There were pros and cons to this campaign, as travelers were not yet vaccinated during this period; therefore, it became necessary to assess the impact of this campaign on infection spread.

A study of descriptive epidemiology by Nishiura et al., revealed travelers were at increased risk of infection, especially when traveling across prefectures [4]. Because the number of interactions among travelers likely increases with time and

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distance traveled, travelers have an increased risk of infection. This begs a question. If travelers are at increased risk of infection, are residents of tourist destinations also at increased risk of infection? In an attempt to answer this question, the author compared data of infected residents of Gunma prefecture, which is an area well-known for its hot spring resorts, between those residing in tourist and non-tourist destinations [5]. It was found that the number of infected residents in the tourist destinations did not increase much, despite an increase in numbers of travelers. It is possible that residents of tourist destinations, especially those working in the tourism industry, took more thorough measures against infection to counteract the sluggish tourism industry. If infected people are found at hotels and guest houses, it may lead directly to business closures. The risk of infection increases among people that are together for a long time, however, hosts and travelers rarely remain together, and as a result, transmission of infection between travelers and hosts was less likely to occur.

It is considered more important for travelers themselves to take thorough infection control measures than for residents of tourist destinations during the COVID-19 epidemic. COVID-19 is still

prevalent, and with resumption of social activities, numbers of travelers will increase worldwide. Based on the above evidence, numbers of infected residents of tourist destinations may not increase much if appropriate infection control measures are taken in tourist destinations. However, travelers should strengthen further their infection control measures (such as obtain vaccination). It is important to make use of these findings to survive the “corona era”.

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