

Can seafarers get vaccinated against COVID-19 in German ports?

Yes, in Hamburg, Kiel, Rostock, Bremen and Bremerhaven and in other German ports, seafarers can get vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus – no matter the nationality and the flag of their ships. The immunizations are free-of-charge and voluntary. Usually, the vaccine by Johnson & Johnson is administered because only one shot of the vaccine is required. Transport to the immunization locations at the ports is arranged; in some cases, it is possible for mobile immunization teams to come on board.

The masters of the ships are asked to grant their seafarers shore leave for the immunizations. Aside from protection of the seafarers' health, the immunizations facilitate later crew changes, as many states demand proof of immunization to enter their country. All relevant health experts and shipping representatives recommend immunizations of seafarers, amongst others the International Maritime Employers Council (IMEC) and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) in a joint press release.

If shipping companies and masters are interested, they can contact their shipping agents in Germany who will take care of the organization. Details about the immunization programme for seafarers in Germany is summarized in a notice by the Zentralverband Deutscher Schiffsmakler e. V. An overview of the immunization programmes for seafarers all over the world is available on the website of ICMA, the International Christian Maritime Association (seamen's missions).

What advice does the Maritime Medical Service have for seafarers and shipping companies regarding the coronavirus?

The Maritime Medical Service of BG Verkehr gives the following advice to seafarers and shipowners on how to protect oneself from the virus and what to do in the event of suspected cases.

- The "Medizinisches Handbuch See" by the Maritime Medical Service of BG Verkehr contains direct recommendations for hygienic measures to be taken when treating possibly infected persons on board. Which include among others

- **for the person treating the patient:**

- Personal protection by wearing the personal protection equipment (PPE) on board, e.g. examination gloves, face masks covering mouth and nose as well as disposable apron

- Hand hygiene with virucidal disinfectant (no. 18.01 of the German medicine chest) to avoid transmission of pathogens

- **for the patient:**

- Isolation measures of infected persons or those suspected of being infected and people they have been in contact with

- **for medical rooms on board**

- Hygiene measures in rooms and for facilities used for medical purposes

- The necessary information about the **procedure when contacting the radio medical advice service** and cooperation with the port health authorities, including the required **reporting procedures**, are given in the

"Medizinische Handbuch See". The "Medizinische Handbuch See" is available at Dingwort Verlag and can be ordered on its website (<https://dingwort-verlag.de/medizin/>). The English version will be available from spring.

- In the event of **suspected cases**, contact the radio medical advice service TMAS Cuxhaven as early as possible where you will receive further advice on the treatment of the ill person.
- On a **European level**, the working group "EU Healthy Gate joint action consortium" has compiled preliminary recommendations for shipping companies when dealing with the Corona virus. Pages 2-8 of the "Interim Advice for ship operators" contain direct recommendations for cruise ships, page 9-11 for cargo ships.
- If there is a suspected case on board a ship that will call on a **German port**, please contact the port health authorities prior to the arrival. Their experts will inform you about further measures. The contact data for the port health authorities in German ports are listed on the website of the city of Hamburg.
- Current and detailed **information about the Corona virus** in general are given on the website of the Robert Koch Institute, the central institution in Germany regarding disease control and prevention, as well as on the website of the World Health Organization WHO.
- The **latest travel notices** for the countries where the Corona virus has occurred can be found on the website of the Federal Foreign Office.

Where do I find concrete advice on dealing with the coronavirus on board sea-going vessels?

Information about the right hygiene and measures in case of a suspect case or a case of illness can be found for example in

- Maritime Medical Handbook of BG Verkehr,
- the guidance document of the International Chamber of Shipping "Coronavirus (COVID-19) - Guidance for Ship Operators for the Protection of the Health of Seafarers",
- in the "Interim Advice for ship operators" by the working group "EU Healthy Gateways joint action consortium" (recommendations for operators of cargo ships on page 9-11).

How do I correctly put on and take off medical protective equipment (e.g. surgical masks) on board?

The Maritime Medical Service of the BG Verkehr explains in a video the right way to put on and take off medical personal protective equipment? This way, the navigational officers responsible for the medical care on board can effectively protect themselves from infectious diseases. The video is available via https://www.medizinisches-handbuch-see.de/Schutzausruestung_en.html in English and <https://www.medizinisches-handbuch-see.de/Schutzausruestung.html> in German.

Should all seafarers embarking get tested for COVID-19 prior to starting their service?

The answer to this question depends on the individual situation of the shipping company - for example the area of operation. Our recommendation for seafarers and shipping companies is to clarify this issue with their company physician.

In any case, it is important that seafarers have adhered to the requirements of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Federal States regarding the containment of the Corona Pandemic (rules for keeping distance and hygiene, contact restrictions etc.) prior to embarking.

Are shipping companies obligated to offer their seafarers on board German-flagged ships a corona rapid test twice a week?

This depends on the individual case and the outcome of the risk assessment by the shipping company. The risk assessment should be carried out together with the company physician and the expert for occupational safety taking into account the following remarks.

Indeed, according to section 5 para. 1 of the German "Corona-Arbeitsschutzverordnung" employers have to offer their employees a Corona test twice a week if they do not work exclusively at home. In principle, this ordinance applies on sea-going vessels under German flag as well. However, due to the special situation in maritime traffic (see below), shipping companies may deviate from this requirement in individual cases. The decisive factor is that the protection objective is still fulfilled, which is that the risk of a Corona infection at work is minimised and the safety and health of the employees is protected.

The shipping company's hygiene and protection concept has to include, first and foremost, measures to effectively reduce the risk of a Corona infection of the seafarers. In particular, the strategies of the IMO circular MSC.1/Circ.1636/Rev.1 and the IMO publications in relation to it should be considered. These strategies focus on early detection of an infection with defined test measures **prior to the seafarer commencing work on board**. In addition, seafarers should be accommodated in individual cabins and in ports the contact between land-based personnel and crew should be minimised as much as possible.

It is particularly difficult to carry out tests on board sea-going vessels because of the following reasons:

- Sea-going vessels are bound by a particularly **critical logistics chain**: EU-approved antigen tests are not always available at short notice in any trading area of the ship. Waiting for the equipment with approved laymen's tests to meet the temporary test requirements of the "Corona-Arbeitsschutzverordnung" would contradict the protection objective of the same ordinance.
- **Verification of the test results** may be difficult in sea-going vessels: The positive result of the rapid test has to be verified immediately with a PCR test and lead to the seafarer's isolation until the PCR test result is available. The samples of the PCR test have to be stored at 4°C and sent cooled, if possible, to a laboratory within a maximum of 72 hours - this is hardly possible on a ship's sea voyage.
- **Antigen rapid tests** do not exclude a Corona infection according to the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) - especially during the early incubation period. P&I Clubs conclude that antigen tests can be used on board to base the decision to treat someone as a suspicious case on board and choose the right steps thereafter (refer to e.g. Information by P&I Gard regarding Corona rapid tests). **However, tests do not replace any of the other protective measures.**

What happens if a medical certificate expires or has already expired?

Expired Medical Fitness Certificates have to be renewed with a medical examination. The list of recognized medical practitioners who conduct medical fitness examinations is given on our website.

If a medical certificate expires during a sea voyage and a renewal is not possible in the port due to Corona restrictions (no crew change or visiting a qualified physician is not possible), the certificate remains valid until the next port where a medical fitness examination can be performed - but at the most for three more months. The legal basis for this is the German Maritime Labour Act, Sec. 12 Para. 6 and the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), Standard A1.2 Para. 9.

The validity of my fitness for sea service was limited to under two years for health reasons – does the extension until 30 June 2020 apply to me as well?

No, you have a health disorder that requires monitoring to avert any risks for you. Please contact your recognized medical practitioner.

Do the medical fitness for sea service examinations take place at the moment?

Yes, the medical fitness examinations take place. You can find the current list of recognized medical physicians currently performing medical fitness examinations under Fitness for sea service.

Do the medical refresher course take place again?

Yes, the courses take place again. The current overview of courses can be found on our website.

Does the on board pharmacy have to be supplemented

No, In the current State of Medical Knowledge the treatment of infectious diseases including those affecting the respiratory system is considered. Special medicine treating a COVID-19 infection does not yet exist.

Are Corona rapid test useful on board sea-going vessels?

Rapid tests for Corona antigen detection can only be used in a very limited fashion in maritime shipping. A negative antigen test result does not exclude a Corona infection according to the Robert Koch Institute, especially during the early incubation phase. Moreover, positive antigen tests have to be confirmed with the so called PCR test. For the PCR test, the samples have to be stored at 4° C and transported cooled, if possible, to the laboratory within 72 hours. Further information is available at the website of the Robert Koch Institute.