

Airline passengers may get a break on electronics

March 19 2012, By JOAN LOWY , Associated Press

The government is taking a tentative step toward making it easier for airlines to allow passengers to use personal electronic devices such as tablets, e-readers and music players during takeoffs and landings.

The [Federal Aviation Administration](#) said Monday it is "exploring ways to bring together all of the key stakeholders involved" - including airlines, [aircraft manufacturers](#), consumer electronics makers, and [flight attendant](#) unions - to discuss whether there are practical ways to test devices to see if they are safe for passengers to use during critical phases of flight.

Technically, FAA rules already permit any airline to test specific makes and models to determine if they generate enough power that they could interfere with sensitive cockpit radios, navigation instruments and other critical equipment. But few airlines have done that kind of extensive testing because there are so many devices, and testing them all - or even many - isn't practical.

Instead, the fallback position has been to comply with FAA rules requiring passengers to turn off all [electronic devices](#) while the aircraft's altitude is below 10,000 feet.

Even if a device were tested and approved for use today, later iterations of the same machine might be different enough that they'd have to be tested again. Today's [Apple iPad](#), for example, isn't the same as the original iPad developed three years ago.

"Can any device do this? The answer is no. All devices are not created equal. Some have more power than others," said Kevin Hiatt, chief operating officer of the industry-supported Flight Safety Foundation of Alexandria, Va.

Another concern is the "additive effects" of a planeload of 200 people using devices at once versus one passenger using a device, said Kenny Kirchoff, senior research and development engineer at the Boeing Co.

Recently manufactured planes have more shielding built into their wiring and other electronic equipment to prevent most [electromagnetic interference](#), but planes that pre-date the early 1990s don't have nearly as much shielding, he said.

While acknowledging "this is an area of consumer interest," the FAA said in a statement that "no changes will be made until we are certain they will not impact safety and security."

Steve Lott, a spokesman for Airlines for America, a trade association for major carriers, said airlines would "work cooperatively with the FAA on any opportunities to evaluate personal electronic devices to ensure customers can use these products safely during flight."

One device that won't be included in the discussions: Cell phones, including smartphones. Another government agency - the Federal Communications Commission - already prohibits their use aloft for reasons unrelated to safety concerns. Because planes travel at hundreds of miles per hour, cellphones on airliners could skip so rapidly from cell tower to cell tower that they might interfere with the service of phone users on the ground, aviation experts said.

Consumer demand to use personal electronics at all times on board planes has been increasing, especially on flights with long delays waiting

for takeoff.

A study done a year ago by Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development at DePaul University in Chicago found that tablet use on commercial flights was growing rapidly. At that time, an estimated one in twelve airline passengers was using a tablet.

"We estimate that 'technology-available time' is reduced by about 30 percent on short flights - or more on really short flights - due to prohibitions on use the devices at takeoff and landing," Joseph Schwieterman, director of the institute, said.

At the same time, American Airlines has received FAA permission for some of their pilots to use iPads in cockpits. Such "electronic flight bags" are an alternative to hauling around pounds of paper operating manuals and navigation charts.

"The average passenger starts to think, 'Wait a minute. If they're using them in the cockpit, why can't I use them in the cabin?' " Hiatt, a former airline pilot, said.

There have also been several high-profile scraps between passengers and cabin crews over use of the devices. Actor Alec Baldwin was booted off an American Airlines flight in Los Angeles in December for refusing to quit playing a word game on his cell phone after a flight attendant ordered him to shut down the device.

More information: [The Federal Aviation Administration](http://www.faaa.gov)
<http://www.faaa.gov>

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