U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Frequently Asked Questions

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ELECTRONIC SYSTEM FOR TRAVEL AUTHORIZATION (ESTA)

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GENERAL INFORMATION ON ESTA

Q: What is the Electronic System for Travel Authorization?

A: The Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) is an automated system that assists in determining eligibility to travel to the United States under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and whether such travel poses any law enforcement or security risk. Upon completion of an ESTA application, a VWP traveler is notified of his or her eligibility to travel to the United States under the VWP.

Q: Why is authorization under ESTA required for U.S.-bound travel under the Visa Waiver Program?

A: The "Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007" (9/11 Act) amended Section 217 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), requiring that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) implement an electronic travel authorization system and other measures to enhance the security of the VWP. ESTA adds another layer of security that allows DHS to determine, in advance of travel, whether an individual is eligible to travel to the United States under the VWP and whether such travel poses a law enforcement or security risk.

Q: Is an ESTA a visa?

A: No. An approved ESTA is not a visa. It does not meet the legal or regulatory requirements to serve in lieu of a U.S. visa when a visa is required under U.S. law. Individuals who possess a valid visa will still be able to travel to the United States on that visa for the purpose for which it was issued. Individuals traveling on valid visas are not required to apply for an ESTA.

Q: What laws govern ESTA?

A: ESTA is required pursuant to Section 217 of the INA, as amended by Section 711 of the 9/11 Act. This legislation required DHS to develop and implement an automated system to determine, in advance of travel, the eligibility of visitors to travel to the United States under the VWP and whether such travel poses a law enforcement or security risk.

Q: How does ESTA mitigate VWP security risks?

A: ESTA supports the mitigation of VWP security risks by enabling DHS to evaluate whether an individual is eligible to travel to the United States under the VWP prior to their boarding a U.S.-bound carrier, and whether such travel poses any law enforcement or security risks. ESTA counterbalances vulnerabilities inherent in visa-free travel by establishing an additional layer of advance scrutiny that enables DHS frontline personnel to focus even more on the small population of potentially dangerous travelers.

Q: Are there any countries that have a similar system in place for in-bound travelers?

A: The Government of Australia has a program that is similar to ESTA, called the Electronic Travel Authority. The Electronic Travel Authority is comparable to ESTA in that travelers planning to visit Australia may submit an application electronically through the Electronic Travel Authority Web site.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

Q: What is the Visa Waiver Program?

A: The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) is administered by DHS and enables eligible citizens or nationals of certain countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without first obtaining a visa. Additional information regarding the VWP is available at: http://www.customs.gov/xp/cgov/travel/id_visa/business_pleasure/vwp/vwp.xml.

Q: Which countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program?

A: Citizens or nationals of the following countries are currently eligible to travel to the United States under the VWP:

Andorra	Iceland	
Australia	Ireland	Norway
Austria	Italy	Portugal
Belgium	Japan	San Marino
Brunei	Republic of Korea	Singapore
Czech Republic	Latvia	Slovakia
Denmark	Liechtenstein	Slovenia
Estonia	Lithuania	Spain
Finland	Luxembourg	Sweden
France	Malta	Switzerland
Germany	Monaco	United Kingdom
Hungary	The Netherlands	
	New Zealand	

Q: What are the passport requirements to travel under the Visa Waiver Program?

A: Travel under the VWP is restricted to travelers possessing passports with specified security features. All VWP travelers must, at a minimum, have a machine readable passport. In addition, depending on when VWP travelers' passports were issued, other passport requirements apply:

- Nationals of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, the Republic of Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, and Slovakia require passports with an integrated chip containing the information from the data page (e-Passport).
- Nationals of other VWP countries:
  - Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended on or after 10/26/06: Passports must also have integrated chips with information from the data page (e-Passport).

- Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended between 10/26/05 and 10/25/06: passports must have digital photographs printed on the data page or integrated chips with information from the data page.
- Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended before 10/26/05: no further requirements.

Please refer to the Visa Waiver Program Traveler Guide on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website for additional details on passport requirements.

ESTA AND DATA PRIVACY

Q: How does the U.S. government protect the privacy of ESTA data and who has access to it?

A: Information submitted by applicants through the ESTA Web site is subject to the same strict privacy provisions and controls that have been established for similar traveler screening programs. Access to such information is limited to those with a professional need to know.

Q: How long is ESTA application data stored?

A: ESTA application data remains active for the period of time that the approved ESTA is valid, which is generally two years, or until the traveler's passport expires, whichever comes first. DHS will then maintain this information for an additional year after which it will be archived for twelve years to allow retrieval of the information for law enforcement, national security, or investigatory purposes. Once the information is archived, the number of officials with access to it will be further limited. This retention is consistent both with CBP's border search authority and with the border security mission mandated for CBP by Congress. Data linked to active law enforcement lookout records, CBP matches to enforcement activities, and/or investigations or cases, including applications for ESTA that are denied, will remain accessible for the life of the law enforcement activities to which they are related.

As DHS transitions to a paperless I-94W, the ESTA application data will replace the data that is collected via the paper I-94W. In those instances where ESTA application data is used in lieu of the information collected via the paper I-94W, the ESTA application data will be maintained in accordance with the retention schedule for the I-94W, 75 years.

Q: Does DHS share ESTA data with others?

A: The information collected by and maintained in ESTA may be used by other components of DHS on a need-to-know basis consistent with the component's mission.

Under current agreements between DHS and the Department of State (DOS), information submitted during an ESTA application may be shared with consular officers of DOS to

assist them in determining whether a visa should be issued to an applicant after an ESTA application has been denied.

Information may be shared with appropriate federal, state, local, tribal, and foreign governmental agencies or multilateral governmental organizations responsible for investigating or prosecuting the violations of, or for enforcing or implementing, a statute, rule, regulation, order or license, or where DHS believes information would assist enforcement of civil or criminal laws. Additionally, information may be shared when DHS reasonably believes such use is to assist in anti-terrorism efforts or intelligence gathering related to national or international security or transnational crime. All sharing will remain consistent with the Privacy Act System of Records Notice, which was published in the Federal Register on June 10, 2008 and is available on the DHS Web site.

While carriers will not receive the ESTA application information that travelers provide to DHS, they will receive confirmation of a passenger's ESTA status via the Advance Passenger Information System (APIS)/APIS Quick Query (AQQ) system indicating whether an ESTA is required and whether authorization has been granted.

Q: Does DHS use application data for any purpose other than determining eligibility for an ESTA?

A: DHS uses the application data to screen the individual before granting authorization to travel to the United States under the VWP. As part of this screening process, information that identifies suspected or known violators of the law and other persons of concern will be provided to the appropriate law enforcement, national security, and/or counterterrorism agency.

WHO NEEDS TO APPLY FOR AN ESTA

Q: Who is required to apply for an ESTA?

A: All nationals or citizens of VWP countries who plan to travel to the United States for temporary business or pleasure under the VWP are required to receive an authorization through ESTA prior to boarding a U.S.-bound airplane or vessel. Accompanied and unaccompanied children, regardless of age, are also required to obtain an independent ESTA approval. A third party, such as a relative or travel agent, is permitted to submit an ESTA application on behalf of a VWP traveler.

Q: Do nationals or citizens of countries that participate in the VWP require an ESTA if they are only transiting the United States en route to another country?

A: Yes. Eligible nationals or citizens of countries that participate in the VWP require either an ESTA or a visa to transit the United States. If a traveler is only planning to transit through the United States en route to another country, when he or she completes the ESTA application, the traveler should enter the words "In Transit" and his or her final

destination location in the address lines under the heading "Address While In The United States."

Q: Do citizens of Bermuda, Canada, the Marshall Islands, or Micronesia need to apply for an ESTA?

A: No. ESTA is required only for citizens or nationals of VWP countries.

ESTA IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

Q: When will travelers be required to obtain an ESTA?

A: As of January 12, 2009, all VWP travelers are required to obtain a travel authorization via ESTA prior to traveling to the United States under the VWP.

Q: When can a traveler apply for travel authorization via ESTA?

A: Any time, but preferably as soon as a VWP traveler begins to plan a trip to visit the United States. Travelers may file ESTA applications through the ESTA Web site at https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov.

Q: What happens if a VWP traveler flies to the United States after ESTA is mandatory, but somehow does not have an ESTA?

A: VWP travelers who have not received an ESTA approval may be denied boarding, experience delayed processing, or be denied admission at a U.S. port of entry.

Q: Do VWP travelers arriving in the United States from a non-VWP country need an ESTA?

A: All VWP travelers arriving by U.S.-bound airplane or vessel, regardless of their country of origination or port of embarkation, require an approved ESTA.

Q. It is less than 72 hours before my flight to the United States. I just found out about the ESTA application, what can I do?

A: While CBP recommends that you apply at least 72 hours before travel, it is possible to apply anytime prior to boarding. Most people receive an answer within seconds.

Q. **What happens to VWP travelers without an ESTA on January 20? Will they be denied boarding? Will CBP have discretion at the ports of entry to allow admission to the United States for emergencies?**

A: VWP travelers who have not received an ESTA approval on January 20 may be denied boarding. CBP will handle emergencies on a case-by-case basis.

Q: **What will airlines do on and after January 20? Will they refuse boarding and/or have the authority to refuse boarding?**

A: After January 20, airlines may refuse boarding to VWP travelers without an approved ESTA.

HOW TO APPLY FOR AN ESTA

Q: How does a traveler apply for an ESTA to travel to the United States?

A: ESTA is a Web-based system. In order to apply for an ESTA, go to https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/, follow the instructions to answer all of the required questions, and submit an application for travel authorization. Travelers will not be able to submit ESTA applications at a U.S. port of entry or a U.S. embassy or consulate.

Q: Is this Web site secure and private?

A: Yes. The Web site is operated by the U.S. government and employs technology to prevent unauthorized access to the information entered and viewed. Information submitted by applicants through the ESTA Web site is subject to the same strict controls that have been established for similar traveler screening programs as governed by U.S. laws and regulations, including but not limited to the Federal Information Security Management Act. Access to such information is limited to those with a professional need to know.

Q: If a traveler has received approval through ESTA to travel to the United States, does that mean that the traveler can enter the country?

A: Not necessarily. An ESTA approval only authorizes a traveler to board a carrier for travel to the United States under the VWP. In the same way that a valid visa does not constitute a determination of admissibility, an approved ESTA is not a guarantee of admissibility to the United States at a port of entry. In all cases, CBP officers make admissibility determinations at U.S. ports of entry or pre-clearance facilities.

Q: Can a VWP traveler with more than one passport travel to the United States on the passport that was not used when applying for an ESTA?

A: No. Each VWP traveler must have an approved ESTA for the passport he or she plans to use for travel to the United States. If a traveler acquires a new passport, he or she must submit a new ESTA application for their new passport.

Q: My passport was issued overseas. How should I answer the question "Passport Issuing Country"?

A: The applicant should choose the country of their nationality, not the physical location where the passport was issued. For example, if you have a Japanese passport issued in the U.S., choose Japan.

Q: How far in advance of a trip is it necessary to apply for travel authorization through ESTA?

A: ESTA applications may be submitted at any time prior to traveling to the United States under the VWP, and in most cases, ESTA provides an almost immediate determination of eligibility for travel under the VWP. However, DHS recommends that ESTA applications be submitted as soon as a VWP traveler begins to plan a trip to visit the United States. VWP travelers are not required to have specific plans to travel to the United States before they apply for an ESTA. As soon as VWP travelers begin to plan a trip to visit the United States, they are encouraged to apply for authorization through the ESTA Web site. Though not required, applicants are encouraged to provide their destination addresses and itineraries.

Each approved ESTA application generally will be valid for a period of two years or until the applicant's passport expires, whichever comes first. A new travel authorization is required if (1) the traveler is issued a new passport; (2) the traveler changes his or her name; (3) the traveler changes his or her gender; (4) the traveler's country of citizenship changes; or (5) the circumstances underlying the traveler's previous responses to any of the ESTA application questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response have changed.

Q: What happens when a traveler submits an application and how long does it take for ESTA to process an application?

A: In most cases, ESTA provides an almost immediate determination of eligibility for travel under the VWP.

There are three types of responses to an ESTA application: Authorization Approved, Authorization Pending, and Travel Not Authorized. Those applicants who receive an approval are authorized to travel to the United States under the VWP. Applicants who receive an Authorization Pending response will need to check the Web site for updates within 72 hours to receive a final response. Applicants whose ESTA applications are denied will be referred to www.travel.state.gov for information on how to apply for a visa to travel to the United States.

Q: How long is a travel authorization via ESTA valid?

A: Each approved ESTA application generally will be valid for a period of two years and allows for multiple visits to the United States within that period without having to apply

for another ESTA. Travelers whose passports will expire in less than two years will receive an ESTA valid until the passport's expiration date.

A new travel authorization is required if (1) the traveler is issued a new passport; (2) the traveler changes his or her name; (3) the traveler changes his or her gender; (4) the traveler's country of citizenship changes; or (5) the circumstances underlying the traveler's previous responses to any of the ESTA application questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response have changed.

Q: What is the cost to the traveler?

A: DHS is not currently collecting a fee for ESTA applications. However, there may be an application fee in the near future.

The ESTA application is currently free, although some non-government agencies may charge a service fee for helping with the ESTA application. In addition, the U.S. statute authorizing ESTA also authorizes a fee for service to cover the costs of administering the system. DHS anticipates having to charge a small service fee in the near future to continue the ESTA program. The amount of this fee has not been determined, but it will be a minimal fee.

Q: What about the $10.00 fee for ESTA?

A. The ESTA application is currently free. Congress is currently considering legislation entitled the "Travel Promotion Act" (TPA). This legislation, if enacted, calls for DHS to collect a fee from Visa Waiver Travelers to promote travel to the United States. This legislation has not yet been passed by the Congress.

Q: I have seen other Web sites that are assisting travelers in applying for their ESTA application. Is there a benefit to using one of these other sites?

A: No. Use of a private service to apply for travel authorization via ESTA will not expedite approval. VWP travelers should be aware that third parties have established Web sites that charge a fee to provide information about ESTA and to submit ESTA applications on behalf of the VWP traveler. These businesses and Web sites are not endorsed by, associated with, or affiliated in any way with DHS or the United States Government. The United States Government does not charge a fee to obtain information about, apply for, or obtain travel authorization through the ESTA Web site.

Q: Can prospective travelers apply for an ESTA without specific travel plans if they want to be able to travel to the United States later on short notice?

A: Yes. VWP travelers are not required to have specific plans to travel to the United States before they apply for an ESTA. If a traveler's destination address in the United States is unknown when he or she completes the ESTA application, the traveler should enter the name of the hotel or approximate location he or she intends to visit. Travelers may

update this information when their plans are finalized, but they will not be required to update their destination addresses or itineraries should they change after their ESTA has been approved. DHS recommends that ESTA applications be submitted as early as possible, as soon as, or even before travel is planned. ESTA will accept applications from last minute and emergency travelers – those VWP travelers that arrive at the airport without an approved ESTA.

Q: How can a traveler apply for an ESTA without access to the Internet?

A: A third party, such as a relative or travel agent, may submit an ESTA application on behalf of the traveler. The traveler is still responsible under the law for the answers submitted on his or her behalf.

Q: What information is needed in order to complete the ESTA application?

A: The traveler must provide, in English, biographical data including name, birth date, and passport information. The traveler will also be required to answer VWP eligibility questions regarding communicable diseases, arrests, and convictions for certain crimes, and past history of visa revocation or deportation, among others.

Q: Are answers required in English? What if the traveler's keyboard does not type in English?

A: Just as the I-94W paper form must be completed in English, information for the ESTA application must also be entered *in English*. The computer utilized to submit the ESTA application should, therefore, be configured to include the U.S. English language with a suitable English font set as a language selection for keyboard input.

If the computer's operating system is Microsoft Windows 95 or higher, please refer to the following Web site for computer configuration:
http://www.conversationexchange.com/resources/keyboard-language.php#xp

If the computer is using a non-Windows operating system, refer to the documentation or help information provided by the operating system vendor.

Q: Do VWP travelers need to bring a paper printout of their ESTA approval to the airport?

A: No. DHS will be able to communicate a traveler's ESTA status to the carriers. However, DHS recommends that travelers print out the ESTA application response in order to maintain a record of their ESTA application number and to have confirmation of their ESTA status.

Q: Is there a way I can contact somebody for assistance regarding ESTA?

A: You may contact the CBP Customer Service Center at (703)526-4200 or 1-877-227-5511. You may also visit www.help.cbp.gov and click on "Find an Answer, Ask a Question." Please note that the CBP Customer Service Center will only be able to answer general questions regarding ESTA. If you need to know why an ESTA application has been denied or you have specific questions regarding your ESTA application, you must file a request with the DHS Redress Program at www.dhs.gov/trip.

UPDATING YOUR ESTA

Q: Does a traveler ever need to reapply for travel authorization through ESTA?

A: Yes, there are instances when a new travel authorization via ESTA would be required. A new travel authorization is required if (1) the traveler is issued a new passport; (2) the traveler changes his or her name; (3) the traveler changes his or her gender; (4) the traveler's country of citizenship changes; or (5) the circumstances underlying the traveler's previous responses to any of the ESTA application questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response have changed.

ESTA approvals will typically be granted for a period of two years or until the applicant's passport expires, whichever is sooner. ESTA will provide validity dates upon approval of the application. Therefore, a traveler must apply for a new ESTA as a result of the expiration of the prior ESTA approval or passport.

Q: What should a traveler do if the information in their passport has changed?

A: If a traveler obtains a new passport or there is a change to his or her passport information, the individual will be required to apply for a new travel authorization through ESTA. A new travel authorization is required if (1) the traveler is issued a new passport; (2) the traveler changes his or her name; (3) the traveler changes his or her gender; (4) the traveler's country of citizenship changes; or (5) the circumstances underlying the traveler's previous responses to any of the ESTA application questions requiring a "yes" or "no" response have changed.

Q: How can an applicant correct a mistake when completing their ESTA application?

A: The ESTA Web site will prompt applicants to review the data submitted for the overall application prior to submission. In addition, the ESTA Web site will require the applicant to reaffirm the passport number prior to submission. If an applicant makes a mistake when filling out the passport information, identifying biographic information, or eligibility questions, and he or she realizes the mistake only after having submitted the ESTA application, he or she will need to submit a new ESTA application. Any other mistakes, including e-mail address, telephone number, carrier, flight number, city of embarkation, and address while in the United States may be corrected or updated by using the ESTA update function.

Q: How does a traveler get help with filling out the ESTA application?

A: The ESTA Web site has extensive guidance available through the online "Help" function. Additionally, a third party, such as a relative or travel agent, will be permitted to submit an ESTA application on behalf of a VWP traveler.

Q: Do travelers need to update their ESTA if it will expire before they depart the U.S.?

A: If an ESTA expires before the traveler leaves the United States, the traveler is not required to apply for another ESTA. However, the traveler will need to apply for a new ESTA for future travel.

Q: I forgot my ESTA application number. How can I log back into the system to update my information or check my application status?

A: Due to security and privacy concerns we are not able to provide a traveler with their application number or travel authorization status. If a traveler lost, forgot, or does not have access to his or her application number or travel status, he or she will need to re-apply for a new travel authorization. The old application will be automatically cancelled.

Q: How can applicants correct a mistake on Passport Issuance Date or Passport Expiration Date after completing their ESTA application?

A: If applicants enter the wrong Passport Issuance Date or Passport Expiration Date and they realize the mistake only after having submitted the ESTA application they will need to re-apply for a new travel authorization. The old application will be automatically cancelled.

Q: How can I see the data I entered? Can I print out the information I entered?

A: The ESTA Web site will prompt applicants to review the data submitted for the overall application prior to submission. The applicant will be able to print out their ESTA Status upon completion of the application. DHS recommends that travelers print out the ESTA application response in order to maintain a record of their ESTA application number and to have confirmation of their ESTA status.

ESTA AND THE I-94W

Q: If a VWP traveler has received ESTA approval, does he or she also need to fill out an I-94W?

A: The implementation of the ESTA program will allow DHS to eliminate the requirement that VWP travelers complete an I-94W prior to being admitted to the United States. We are currently in a transition period, but anticipate that the paper form will be completely replaced in the coming months. Until carriers are capable of receiving and validating messages pertaining to the traveler's ESTA status as part of the traveler's boarding status, travelers will still be required to complete the paper Form I-94W and present it to CBP.

ESTA AND U.S. VISAS

Q: What if a traveler has a current, valid visa?

A: Individuals who possess a valid visa will still be able to travel to the United States on that visa for the purpose for which it was issued. Individuals traveling on valid visas are not required to apply for an ESTA.

Q: I have a B1/B2 visa. Do I need to apply for an ESTA?

A: If you already have a B1/B2 or any other valid visa, you do not need to apply for an ESTA.

ESTA DENIALS

Q: Does the U.S. anticipate that a large number of travelers who previously traveled under the VWP will now be refused an ESTA?

A: The ESTA is designed to screen each traveler for law enforcement or security risks. The vast majority of travelers will receive an approved ESTA.

Q: What should a traveler do if he or she is not approved for travel through ESTA?

A: If an ESTA application is denied and the traveler wishes to continue with the trip, the traveler will be required to apply for a nonimmigrant visa at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate. For more about visa application procedures, please visit www.travel.state.gov.

Q: Should a traveler not approved for travel through ESTA reapply?

A: If an ESTA application is not approved ("Travel Not Authorized"), a traveler may reapply for an ESTA after a period of 24 hours, but unless the circumstances have changed, the traveler will not qualify for an ESTA and will need to apply for a nonimmigrant visa at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate. In addition, reapplying with false information for the purposes of qualifying for an ESTA could make the traveler permanently ineligible for travel to the U.S.

Q: How can a traveler find out the reason an ESTA application was denied?

A: DHS has carefully developed the ESTA program to ensure that only those individuals who are ineligible to travel to the United States under the VWP or those whose travel would pose a law enforcement or security risk are refused an ESTA. While the ESTA Web site provides a link to the DHS Travel Redress Inquiry Program (TRIP) Web site,

there are no guarantees that a request for redress through DHS TRIP will resolve the VWP ineligibility that caused an applicant's ESTA application to be denied.

Please note that Embassies and Consulates are not able to provide details about ESTA denials or resolve the issue that caused the ESTA denial. Embassies and Consulates will be able to process an application for a non-immigrant visa, which, if approved, will be the only way that a traveler whose ESTA application has been denied would be authorized to travel to the U.S.

Q: If a traveler was denied ESTA approval and needs to travel immediately, is it possible to get an emergency visa appointment at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate?

A: Unfortunately, the Department of State is unable to guarantee next-day appointments because of varying demand for visas. As a result, we encourage travelers to apply for an ESTA approval far in advance of the proposed travel. Information about the appointment process is available at the nearest consular section or at www.travel.state.gov.