

States lift restrictions gradually amid fears of new variant

January 27 2021, by David Eggert and Don Babwin



In this Jan. 20, 2021, file photo, Diners Susan and Hank Gill eat inside at Nunzio's Restaurant in Loves Park, Ill. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (Scott P. Yates/Rockford Register Star via AP, File)

States are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving gradually and cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S.

While the easing could cause case rates to rise, health experts say it can work if done in a measured way and if the public remains vigilant about masks and social distancing.

"If the frequency goes up, you tighten it up. If the frequency goes down, you loosen up. Getting it just right is almost impossible," said Dr. Arnold Monto, a public health professor at the University of Michigan. "There's no perfect way to do this."

As Michigan's coronavirus rate dropped to the nation's fifth-lowest over the last two weeks, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer said bars and restaurants can welcome indoor customers next week for the first time in 2 1/2 months. But they will be under a 10 p.m. curfew and will be limited to 25% of capacity, or half of what was allowed the last time she loosened their restrictions, in June.

The state previously authorized the resumption of in-person classes at high schools and the partial reopening of movie theaters.

"We're in a stronger position because we've taken this pause," Whitmer said. "But we are also very mindful of the fact that this variant is now here in Michigan. It poses a real threat."



In this Nov. 24, 2020, file photo, Waitress Rikkie Schleben takes down lunch orders from Tabitha Kemble, right, and her father Ken Kemble for dine-in service at Woodchips BBQ in Lapeer, Mich. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (Jake May/The Flint Journal via AP, File)

The COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. has climbed past 425,000, with the number of dead running at close to all-time highs at nearly 3,350 a day on average.

But newly confirmed cases have dropped over the past two weeks from an average of about 248,000 per day to around 166,000. And the number

of people in the hospital with COVID-19 has fallen by tens of thousands to 109,000.

At the same time, health experts have warned that the more contagious and possibly more lethal variant sweeping Britain will probably become the dominant source of infection in the U.S. by March. It has been reported in over 20 states.

Other mutant versions are circulating in South Africa and Brazil. The Brazil variant has been detected for the first time in the U.S., in Minnesota.

Chicago and surrounding suburbs allowed indoor dining over the weekend for the first time since October. Major cultural attractions including the Field Museum and Shedd Aquarium reopened with crowd limits.



In this Jan. 20, 2021, file photo, a bottle of hand sanitizer is available to diners eating inside at Nunzio's Restaurant in Loves Park, Ill. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (Scott P. Yates/Rockford Register Star via AP, File)

Steve Lombardo III, an owner of a Chicago-area restaurant group, called being able to seat customers indoors a "huge boost." One of its most famous restaurants, Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse, has been using hospital-grade air filtration systems in the hopes of staying afloat, he said.

"Will we be making money? Probably not," Lombardo said. "But we won't be hemorrhaging money like we have the last three months."

Washington, D.C., also recently ended its monthlong ban on indoor dining, but one in New York City remains in effect.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom this week lifted stay-at-home orders he imposed last month when hospitals were so overwhelmed with virus patients that they were on the verge of rationing lifesaving care. Restaurants and places of worship will be able to operate outdoors, and many stores will be able to have more shoppers inside.



In this Jan. 23, 2021, file photo, patrons enjoy drinks and lunch in the semi-open area of Pilsen Yards restaurant in Chicago after Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker allowed restaurants to open for indoor dining. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (Abel Uribe/Chicago)

Tribune via AP, File)

Jen Diaz, a 38-year-old technical writer from Santa Clarita, California, who works remotely and has not left her home since a trip to the supermarket in March, said she was "horrified" when she heard the governor's announcement. She has rheumatoid arthritis, and her treatments suppress her immune system, but she has yet to receive a vaccination because she is under 65.

"I was really, really proud of California's response at first" in the early months of the pandemic, she said. "Suddenly we're just opening everything. 'Let's go to the mall!'"

She added: "The government doesn't seem to be taking this as seriously as it once did, on a state level."

In Oregon, Gov. Kate Brown announced that some indoor operations such as gyms and movie theaters can reopen Friday with limited capacity. Indoor dining is still banned in the hardest-hit counties.



In this Jan. 26, 2021, file photo, Rockford resident Shane Baker sips coffee and surfs the internet on her mobile phone while sitting inside Wired Cafe in Rockford, Ill. Baker is a regular at the coffee shop who is happy that coronavirus restrictions have loosened. (Scott P. Yates/Rockford Register Star via AP, File)

Not all places are taking as cautious an approach.

After North Dakota dropped to the nation's second-lowest case rate, Republican Gov. Doug Burgum this month not only relaxed limits on the number of people who can gather at restaurants and bars but also allowed a statewide mask mandate to expire last week.

"The fight is far from over, but we can certainly see the light of the end of the tunnel from here," Burgum said.

Dr. Joshua Sharfstein, vice dean for public health practice and community engagement at Johns Hopkins University and Maryland's former health department chief, cautioned such a step can carry heavy risk.

"I don't think it's unreasonable to start to reopen, but if people think that's the green light to pretend the virus doesn't exist, then we're going to be right back to where we were," Sharfstein said. "If you do restrictions, the virus goes down. You can open up and see how it goes. But if the variants really take hold, that may not be so easy."



In this Jan. 26, 2021, file photo, a woman is vaccinated inside her vehicle at a mass COVID-19 vaccination site outside The Forum in Inglewood, Calif. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are

moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)



In this Jan. 25, 2021, file photo, Sara Nguyen, right, sits behind a plexiglass shield as she gives a manicure to Christine Frazer at KB Nails in Sacramento, Calif. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli, File)



In this Nov. 24, 2020, file photo, Debbie Biga, center, and her husband Joe, both of Port Huron, enjoy a meal together while keeping social distance from other customers at Woodchips BBQ in Lapeer, Mich. Several states are loosening their coronavirus restrictions on restaurants and other businesses because of improved infection and hospitalization numbers but are moving cautiously, in part because of the more contagious variant taking hold in the U.S. (Jake May/The Flint Journal via AP, File)

Many restaurants say they cannot survive offering only takeout during the winter, when the cold makes it difficult if not impossible to offer outdoor dining.

Rick Bayless, one of the most decorated chefs in the U.S., said allowing indoor dining at his Mexican restaurants in Chicago may buy him some

time.

"With 25% indoor we might be able to make it to the spring, when people will want to go outdoors," he said.

Bayless said the business survived a previous shutdown only because his landlord allowed him to stay rent-free for three months. The uncertainty has taken a toll on his workers, he said.

"It's been touch-and-go. When they allowed us to open up on Saturday, we had staff in here that were literally in tears," Bayless said.

Babwin reported from Chicago. Associated Press writer Sophia Tareen in Chicago contributed to this report.

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