

## Washington, DC, to loosen virus restrictions this weekend

April 27 2021, by Ashraf Khalil

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In this March 15, 2021, file photo, Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser takes a question during a coronavirus update at a news conference in Washington. Bowser announced April 26, that she is relaxing a number of COVID-19 restrictions after more than a year of virus lockdown. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik, File)

With COVID-19 numbers dropping, officials in the nation's capital are relaxing a number of restrictions after more than a year of lockdown.

The changes represent a step toward normality for Washington, D.C., residents and long-term hope for the city's vital tourism and convention industry, which has been devastated by the pandemic.

Mayor Muriel Bowser announced Monday that starting on May 1, gyms and fitness centers can operate at 50% [capacity](#), and live music will be permitted in gardens and outdoor spaces. Restaurants will be permitted to seat 10 people per table outdoors, up from the previous limit of six per table. However, the 25% capacity limit for indoor dining will remain unchanged for now.

Retail businesses can increase admittance from 25% to 50% capacity. Houses of worship can increase to 40% capacity, though Bowser said the government was still encouraging residents to attend virtual or outdoor services for now.

Earlier in April, Bowser had announced some other changes that will also take effect in May. These include allowing entertainment venues like [concert halls](#) and [movie theaters](#) to increase to 25% capacity and allowing public pools to open this summer at 50% capacity.

The Smithsonian network of museums had previously announced that several museums and the National Zoo will reopen on a staggered schedule over several weeks during the month of May. The National Air and Space Museum's Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Virginia, will reopen on May 5. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery will reopen on May 14. The National Museum of American History, National Museum of the American Indian and the National Zoo will reopen on May 21.

All Smithsonian facilities will required timed entry passes to limit the crowds; the passes are free and available from [the Smithsonian website](#).

As of Monday, Washington's daily infection rate has dropped to 14 cases per 100,000, the lowest number since last fall. But Bowser still preached caution, saying residents needed to remain patient as the vaccination program continued.

"The way we get open is to crush the virus and get people vaccinated," she said. "So we're trying to do all of those things—moderate the restrictions where they're warranted and safe, but really focus on crushing those numbers of infections and getting people vaccinated."

Bowser said that approximately 237,000 residents had received at least one vaccine dose, out of about 500,000 adults in the District of Columbia. The government will also begin offering vaccinations to residents as young as 16, she said.

City Health Director Dr. LaQuandra Nesbitt acknowledged that vaccine reluctance remained an issue, but called on residents to encourage skeptical friends and relatives to take the step.

"It's time for people to start having talks with their friends and say, 'Hey, we're not hanging out with you unless you get vaccinated,'" Nesbitt said.

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