

'Great day for America': Vaccinated can largely ditch masks

May 13 2021, by Zeke Miller and Michael Balsamo



President Joe Biden claps with Vice President Kamala Harris after speaking on updated guidance on face mask mandates and COVID-19 response, in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 13, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

In a major step toward returning to pre-pandemic life, the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention eased mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people on Thursday, allowing them to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

"Today is a great day for America," President Joe Biden said during a Rose Garden address heralding the new guidance.

"If you are fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask," he said, summarizing the new guidance and encouraging more Americans to roll up their sleeves. "Get vaccinated—or wear a mask until you do."

The guidance still calls for wearing masks in crowded indoor settings like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, but it will help clear the way for reopening workplaces, schools, and other venues—even removing the need for social distancing for those who are fully vaccinated.

"We have all longed for this moment—when we can get back to some sense of normalcy," said Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said at an earlier White House briefing.

The CDC and the Biden administration have faced pressure to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated people—those who are two weeks past their last required COVID-19 vaccine dose—in part to highlight the benefits of getting the shot. The country's aggressive vaccination campaign has paid off: U.S. virus cases are at their lowest rate since September, deaths are at their lowest point since last April and the test positivity rate is at the lowest point since the pandemic began.



President Joe Biden walks with Vice President Kamala Harris after speaking on updated guidance on face mask mandates and COVID-19 response, in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 13, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Walensky said the long-awaited change is thanks to the millions of people who have gotten vaccinated and is based on the latest science about how well those shots are working.

"Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities -- large or small—without wearing a mask or physically distancing," Walensky said. "If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic."

The new guidance is likely to open the door to confusion, since there is no surefire way for businesses or others to distinguish between those who are fully vaccinated and those who are not. Walensky and Biden said people who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks indoors.

"We've gotten this far—please protect yourself until you get to the finish line," Biden said, noting that most Americans under 65 are not yet fully vaccinated. He said the government was not going to enforce the mask wearing guidance on those not yet fully vaccinated.



Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention speaks during a House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis on the Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, April 15, 2021. (Amr Alfiky/The New York Times via AP, Pool)

"We're not going to go out and arrest people," added Biden, who said he believes the American people want to take care of their neighbors. "If you haven't been vaccinated, wear your mask for your own protection and the protection of the people who also have not been vaccinated yet."

To date about 154 million Americans, more than 46% of the population, have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine and more than 117 million are fully vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed in recent weeks, but with the authorization Wednesday of the Pfizer shot for children ages 12 to 15, a new burst of doses is expected in the coming days.

"All of us, let's be patient, be patient with one another," Biden said, acknowledging some Americans might be hesitant about removing their masks after more than a year of living in a pandemic that has killed more than 580,000 in the U.S. and more than 3.3 million people worldwide.

Just two weeks ago, the CDC recommended that fully vaccinated people continue to wear masks indoors in all settings and outdoors in large crowds.



President Joe Biden arrives to speak on updated guidance on face mask mandates and COVID-19 response, in the Rose Garden of the White House, Thursday, May 13, 2021, in Washington. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Walensky said evidence from the U.S. and Israel shows the vaccines are as strongly protective in real world use as they were in earlier studies, and that so far they continue to work even though some worrying mutated versions of the virus are spreading.

The more people continue to get vaccinated, the faster infections will drop—and the harder it will be for the virus to mutate enough to escape vaccines, she stressed, urging everyone 12 and older who is not yet vaccinated to sign up.

And while some people still get COVID-19 despite being vaccinated, Walensky said, that's rare. She cited evidence that those infections tend to be milder, shorter and harder to spread to others. If people who are vaccinated do develop COVID-19 symptoms, they should immediately put their mask back on and get tested, she said.



First lady Jill Biden arrives at a vaccination clinic Thursday, May 13, 2021, at a high school in Charleston, W.Va. Behind her are U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and his wife, Gayle Manchin. (Kenny Kemp/Charleston Gazette-Mail via AP)

There are some caveats. Walensky encouraged people who have weak immune systems, such as from organ transplants or cancer treatment, to

talk with their doctors before shedding their masks. That's because of continued uncertainty about whether the vaccines can rev up a weakened immune system as well as they do normal, healthy ones.



In this May 11, 2021 photo, Rochelle Walensky, Director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, testifies before a Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, Tuesday, May 11, 2021 on Capitol Hill in Washington. (Jim Lo Scalzo/Pool via AP)

The new guidance had an immediate effect at the White House, which has taken a cautious approach to easing virus restrictions. Staffers were informed that masks are no longer required for people who are fully vaccinated. And Biden, who was meeting with vaccinated Republican

lawmakers in the Oval Office when the guidance was announced, led the group in removing their masks Thursday afternoon.

First lady Jill Biden, who was traveling in West Virginia, told reporters that "we feel naked," after the guidance, as she and her party removed their face coverings. Then she paused. "I didn't mean it that way!"

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Citation: 'Great day for America': Vaccinated can largely ditch masks (2021, May 13) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-indoor-mask-mandate-vaccinated-people.html>

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