

States, business sort out what new CDC mask guidance means

May 15 2021, by Heather Hollingsworth and Stephen Groves



In this May 13, 2021, file photo, a child wears a mask while looking out the window of a beachfront restaurant in Santa Monica, Calif. A number of states immediately embraced new guidelines from the CDC that say fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most situations. But other states - and some businesses—are taking a wait-and-see attitude. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

More than a dozen states quickly embraced new federal guidelines that say fully vaccinated Americans no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most cases. But other states and cities and some major businesses hesitated amid doubts about whether the approach is safe or even workable.

As many business owners pointed out, there is no easy way to determine who has been vaccinated and who hasn't. And the [new guidelines](#), issued Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, essentially work on the honor system, leaving it up to people to do the right thing.

Labor groups and others warned that employees at stores, restaurants, bars and other businesses could be left exposed to the coronavirus from customers and could be forced into the unwanted role of "vaccination police."

But in Malvern, Pennsylvania, owner Sean Weinberg took down the mask signs Friday at Restaurant Alba, which he runs with his wife. He also emailed his employees to let them know they can forgo masks at work if they are fully vaccinated.

"It's just a headache we don't want to have to fight any more," Weinberg said.

Several major chains, including CVS, Home Depot, Macy's and supermarket giant Kroger Co., said they are still requiring masks in stores for the time being, though some said they are reviewing their policies.



A customer exits a corner market while wearing a protective mask in the retail shopping district of the SoHo neighborhood of the Manhattan borough of New York, Friday, May 14, 2021. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has yet to say whether he will change his state's mask mandate in light of new federal guidance that eases rules for fully vaccinated people. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

But Walmart, the world's largest retailer, Costco and Trader Joe's said Friday that they won't require vaccinated shoppers to wear a mask in U.S. stores, unless state or local laws say otherwise.

Vaccinated shoppers can go maskless immediately, Walmart said. Vaccinated workers can stop wearing them on May 18. As an incentive, the company said it is offering workers \$75 if they prove they have been vaccinated. Both Costco and Trader Joe's said they would not require

proof of vaccination, but employees at the grocery chain will still need to cover their faces.

Half the states had mask requirements in place for most indoor spaces when the CDC issued its recommendations amid tumbling cases and rising vaccination rates.

Nearly 47% of the U.S. population has received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and cases have dropped to their lowest level since September, at an average of about 35,000 a day. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky noted in making the announcement that the vaccine has proved powerfully effective in preventing serious COVID-19 illness.



A sign requiring a COVID-19 protective mask is required to enter is in front of Dee's Cafe, Friday, May 14, 2021, in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood. (AP

Photo/Keith Srakocic)

Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, Ohio, Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Kentucky, Washington, Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, North Carolina, Kansas, Colorado and Rhode Island announced plans to fall in line with the CDC guidance either immediately or in the coming weeks. Some cities, including New Orleans and Anchorage, did the same.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said the new approach makes clear that vaccines are the fastest way to get back to doing the things "we all love." Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear called the guidance a "game-changer." And Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said the change is "a heck of a benefit."

Other states, such as California, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Hawaii and Massachusetts, and cities like Minneapolis and St. Paul kept mask rules in place for the time being.

"We're frankly not there yet," New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said. And Hawaii Gov. David Ige said, "We are unable to determine who is vaccinated and who is not vaccinated. The best mitigation measure is for everyone to wear a mask."



People go massless on the Atlanta Beltline on Friday, May 14, 2021, after the CDC updated their mask guidelines for COVID-19 vaccinated people. (AP Photo/Ben Gray)

Industry leaders warned of the potential for confusion and hard feelings among customers because of the varying rules from place to place. Even in states that have dropped mask mandates, stores and other businesses can still require face coverings if they want.

Confusion over the guidance extended to the White House, where press secretary Jen Psaki said, "I think we're still figuring out how to implement it."

The CDC and the Biden administration had faced pressure to ease

restrictions on fully vaccinated people in part to highlight the benefits of the shots and motivate other people to get inoculated.

Restaurant workers in places where mask mandates remain are finding themselves caught in the middle, said Jot Condie, the president of the California Restaurant Association. He said his phone has been "blowing up" with reports of increasingly belligerent customers.



Customers wait in a line before entering a store on Broadway while wearing protective masks in the retail shopping district of the SoHo neighborhood of the Manhattan borough of New York, Friday, May 14, 2021. Gov. Andrew Cuomo has yet to say whether he will change his state's mask mandate in light of new federal guidance that eases rules for fully vaccinated people. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

"The person who is not wearing a mask will say, 'My president just told me that the CDC just issued guidance and I've been vaccinated and I'm not going to wear a mask,'" he said.

Scott Dolch, executive director of the Connecticut Restaurant Association, said owners are concerned about being put in a difficult position.

"They're like, OK, now I have to deal with the honor system, hoping that that person that told me they're totally vaccinated" is telling the truth, Dolch said.

The CDC announcement sent airline stocks soaring, though the guidance still calls for masks in crowded indoor settings such as planes, buses, trains, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, and says people should obey all local and state regulations.

Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson, South Dakota's lone congressman, marked the announcement by sharing a video demonstrating how cast-off [masks](#) can now be used for things like suit pocket handkerchiefs, bookmarks or beer cozies.



In this May 13, 2021, file photo, although no longer required outside, a sign advises visitors to wear masks at the Denver Zoo in Denver. A number of states immediately embraced new guidelines from the CDC that say fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most situations. But other states - and some businesses—are taking a wait-and-see attitude. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski, File)

"It seems too wasteful to just throw them away," he said. "I think I'll have my mother make them into a quilt."

Shelby Lofton, a reporter for WKYT-TV in Lexington, Kentucky, tweeted: "So, I guess I'll start wearing lipstick again. Also need to work on my poker face."

In Detroit, a fully vaccinated Christoph Cunningham, 28, wore a mask as he rode an electric scooter to a bar for lunch and said he agrees with the relaxed guidelines.

"I have confidence in the science behind it all," said Cunningham, who runs a catering business. "I'll eventually take my mask off more and more."

The president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, said the 1.7 million-member union is still trying to sort out what the change means for schools. Many school districts already ditched mask requirements in recent weeks, as had many states and cities, as virus numbers fell.



In this April 30, 2021, file photo, a family takes a photo in front of Sleeping Beauty's Castle at Disneyland in Anaheim, Calif. A number of states immediately embraced new guidelines from the CDC that say fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most situations. But other states - and some businesses—are taking a wait-and-see attitude. (AP Photo/Jae Hong, File)



In this May 13, 2021, file photo, pedestrian walks in front of an American flag painted on a wall during the coronavirus outbreak in San Francisco. A number of states immediately embraced new guidelines from the CDC that say fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most situations. But other states - and some businesses—are taking a wait-and-see attitude. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)



John Bechtold puts his face covering on as he passes his storefront sign that lists COVID-19 protective covering required to enter in his retail shop, Friday, May 14, 2021, in Pittsburgh's South Side neighborhood. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)



In this April 27, 2021, file photo, masked and unmasked pedestrians walk along the Las Vegas Strip in Las Vegas. A number of states immediately embraced new guidelines from the CDC that say fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks indoors or out in most situations. But other states - and some businesses—are taking a wait-and-see attitude. (AP Photo/John Locher, File)

That meant the CDC announcement didn't mean much in places like the tourist town of Branson, Missouri, which dropped its mandate early last month after several mask supporters were voted out of office.

"I think it just further supports the decision we made to lift the mask mandate," said the town's new mayor, Larry Milton. "It was dividing our community. We heard loud and clear from voters that they wanted the mask mandate repealed."

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