

More states ease lingering virus rules as vaccine rates rise

May 30 2021, by David Klepper



This May 3, 2021 photo shows an intentionally disabled slot machine next to a woman playing a different slot machine while wearing a face mask at the Hard Rock casino in Atlantic City, N.J. On Friday, May 28, New Jersey dropped its indoor mask mandate and Atlantic City casinos turned slot machines that were disabled to create distance between players back on again. Credit: AP Photo/Wayne Parry

Just in time for Memorial Day weekend, more U.S. cities and states are shrugging off lingering COVID-19 restrictions as vaccination rates rise and the number of infections falls.

Massachusetts lifted a mask requirement Saturday, a day after New Jersey dropped its mandate. In New York City and Chicago, officials reopened public beaches, though winds and cool temperatures kept crowds away.

"Welcome back, Chicago," Mayor Lori Lightfoot said in a video announcement. "The lakefront is open."

Chicago's Navy Pier also reopened [retail stores](#) and restaurants, carnival rides, and tour boats and cruises after the pandemic forced monthslong closures at the busy tourist destination.

It's one more sign of progress that reflects increasingly positive health data. On Saturday, Illinois' Department of Public Health reported 802 new confirmed and probable infections, the second-lowest one-day total in the last six months.

For businesses nationwide, the improving outlook and long holiday weekend offered a chance to welcome customers back to in-person shopping.

Midtown Scholar Bookstore in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, opened its doors to customers for the first time in nearly 14 months Friday. Masks are still required.



Natalia Dubom, of Honduras, gets the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine at Miami International Airport, Friday, May 28, 2021, in Miami. The vaccine was offered to all passengers arriving at the airport. Florida's Emergency Management Agency is running the program through Sunday. Credit: AP Photo/Marta Lavandier

The business had switched to internet orders, sidewalk sales and virtual author events to survive the pandemic.

"We had to get creative, we had to pivot," store manager Alex Brubaker said. "Our readers and our customers have been incredible. It's a rainy weekend, but the bookstore is full."

Minnesota lifted all statewide coronavirus restrictions for bars and

restaurants Friday, though local governments can maintain their own social distancing and mask rules.

About 50% of the U.S. population has now received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, according to the latest [numbers](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 40% of the population is fully vaccinated.

Vermont boasts the nation's highest vaccination rate, with nearly 70% of its residents having received at least one dose. The governor is expected to drop all pandemic-related restrictions once 80% of Vermont's eligible population has received at least one dose, a milestone the state expects to hit next week.



Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Rochelle Walensky, center, walks off the field after throwing out the ceremonial first pitch to Boston Red Sox's Christian Vazquez, left, before a baseball game against the Miami Marlins, Saturday, May 29, 2021, in Boston. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer

In neighboring Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker lifted a mask mandate effective Saturday, though face coverings are still required in certain places, including on public transportation. The state also still encourages unvaccinated people to wear masks in indoor or public areas.

CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky threw out the ceremonial first pitch at Fenway Park before the Red Sox played the Miami Marlins on the first day that Massachusetts dropped limits on crowd sizes. Red Sox president Sam Kennedy said about 24,000 tickets were sold.

"It's such a bright moment right now," Walensky told reporters, encouraging people to get vaccinated. "It's been a really long year, and we've seen some really, really dark times. ... I'm thrilled we're back where we are right now."

According to Massachusetts officials, 78% of all adult residents have had at least one vaccine dose.



Ar'Tell Young, left, and Marlena Lee, enjoy a tropical drink Wednesday, May 26, 2021, in Miami Beach, Fla. America's tourist destinations are facing a severe worker shortage just as they try to rebound from a devastating year lost to the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Marta Lavandier



Fans stand for the national anthem before a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the Miami Marlins, Saturday, May 29, 2021, in Boston. Saturday marks the end of most COVID-19 restrictions in Massachusetts. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer



A traveller takes photos of windows titled "Harmonic Convergence," by artist Christopher Janney, Friday, May 28, 2021, at Miami International Airport in Miami. The Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau is anticipating hotel occupancy levels to surge above pre-pandemic levels. Credit: AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee



Duck boat riders remain masked as they take a Boston Duck Tour on Wednesday, May 26, 2021, in Boston. America's tourist destinations are facing a severe worker shortage just as they try to rebound from a devastating year lost to the pandemic. Credit: AP Photo/Mary Schwalm



Fans line up to pass through security at the entrance to Fenway Park before a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the Miami Marlins, Saturday, May 29, 2021, in Boston. Saturday marks the end of most COVID-19 restrictions in Massachusetts. Credit: AP Photo/Michael Dwyer

"New cases have dropped by 94% since they peaked in January," Baker said Friday as he announced the end of the restrictions. "Hospitalizations are down by about 90% since their peak. This progress has made it possible for us to lift all remaining COVID restrictions across the commonwealth."

Virginia relaxed its distancing and capacity restrictions on Friday. President Joe Biden [celebrated](#) the progress with a visit to a rock climbing gym in northern Virginia.

Millions of Americans planned to travel over the long weekend, and airports reported some of their highest traffic since the pandemic began.

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