

CDC changes course on indoor masks in some parts of the US

July 27 2021, by Mike Stobbe



In this Monday, July 19, 2021, file photo, shoppers wear masks inside of The Cool store in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reversed course Tuesday, July 27, 2021, on some masking guidelines, recommending that even vaccinated people return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the coronavirus is surging. Credit: AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention changed course Tuesday on some masking guidelines, recommending that even vaccinated people return to wearing masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the delta variant of the coronavirus is fueling infection surges.

Citing new information about the variant's ability to spread among vaccinated people, the CDC also recommended indoor masks for all teachers, staff, students and visitors at schools nationwide, regardless of vaccination status.

In other developments, President Joe Biden said his administration was considering requiring all federal workers to get vaccinated. His comments came a day after the Department of Veterans Affairs became the first federal agency to require its health care workers receive the vaccine.

Biden dismissed concerns that the new masking guidance could invite confusion, saying Americans who remain unvaccinated are the ones who are "sowing enormous confusion."

"The more we learn about this virus and the delta variation, the more we have to be worried and concerned. And there's only one thing we know for sure—if those other 100 million people got vaccinated, we'd be in a very different world," he said.

The White House quickly pivoted on its own masking guidance, asking all staff and reporters to wear masks indoors because the latest CDC data shows that Washington faces a substantial level of coronavirus transmission.



This March 6, 2020, file photo, shows the headquarters for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The nation's top health agency is expected to backpedal on its masking guidelines and recommend that even vaccinated people wear masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the coronavirus is surging, according to a federal official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to release the data. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected to make an announcement Tuesday, July 27, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/ Ron Harris, File

The CDC's new mask policy follows recent decisions in [Los Angeles](#) and St. Louis to revert to indoor mask mandates amid the spike in COVID-19 infections. The nation is averaging more than 57,000 cases a day and 24,000 COVID-19 hospitalizations.

The guidance on masks in indoor public places applies in parts of the U.S. with at least 50 new cases per 100,000 people in the last week. That includes 60 percent of U.S. counties, officials said. New case rates are particularly high in the South and Southwest, according to [a CDC tracker](#). In Arkansas, Louisiana and Florida, every county has a high transmission rate.

Most new infections in the U.S. continue to be among unvaccinated people. So-called breakthrough infections, which generally cause milder illness, can occur in vaccinated people. When earlier strains of the virus predominated, infected vaccinated people were found to have low levels of virus and were deemed unlikely to spread the virus much, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said.

But with the delta variant, a mutated and more transmissible version of the virus, the level of virus in infected vaccinated people is "indistinguishable" from the level of virus in the noses and throats of unvaccinated people, Walensky said.

The data emerged over the last couple of days from over 100 samples from several states and one other country. It is unpublished, and the CDC has not released it. But "it is concerning enough that we feel like we have to act," Walensky said.



In this Friday, March 5, 2021 file photo, a restaurant worker holds his face mask in Biloxi, Miss. On Friday, March 12, 2021. The nation's top health agency is expected to backpedal on its masking guidelines and recommend that even vaccinated people wear masks indoors in parts of the U.S. where the coronavirus is surging, according to a federal official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to release the data. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected to make an announcement Tuesday, July 27, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis

Vaccinated people "have the potential to spread that virus to others," she said.

For much of the pandemic, the CDC advised Americans to wear masks indoors and outdoors if they were within 6 feet of one another.

Then [in April](#), as vaccination rates rose sharply, the agency eased its guidelines on the wearing of masks outdoors, saying that fully vaccinated Americans no longer needed to cover their faces unless they were in a big crowd of strangers. In May, the guidance was eased further, allowing fully vaccinated people to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

The guidance still called for masks in crowded indoor settings, like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, but it cleared the way for reopening workplaces and other venues.

Subsequent CDC guidance said fully vaccinated people no longer needed to wear masks at schools either.



Katrina Taormina draws the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine into a syringe at Lehman High School, Tuesday, July 27, 2021, in New York. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging everyone in K-12 schools to wear a mask when they return to class, regardless of vaccination status. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

For months, COVID cases, deaths and hospitalizations were falling steadily, but those trends began to change at the beginning of the summer as the delta variant began to spread widely, especially in areas with lower vaccination rates.

Some public health experts said they thought the earlier CDC decision was based on good science. But those experts were also critical, noting that there was no call for Americans to document their vaccination status, which created an honor system. Unvaccinated people who did not want to wear masks in the first place saw it as an opportunity to do what they wanted, they said.

"If all the unvaccinated people were responsible and wore mask indoors, we would not be seeing this surge," said Dr. Ali Khan, a former CDC disease investigator who now is dean of the University of Nebraska's College of Public Health.

Lawrence Gostin, a public health law professor at Georgetown University, drew a similar conclusion.

"It was completely foreseeable that when they (the CDC) made their announcement, masking would no longer be the norm, and that's exactly what's happened," Gostin said.



Schools Chancellor Meisha Porter applauds students at Lehman High School during a discussion about the COVID-19 vaccine, Tuesday, July 27, 2021, in New York. Some of the students have been vaccinated and some have not. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging everyone in K-12 schools to wear a mask when they return to class, regardless of vaccination status. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

The CDC may be seen as "flip-flopping," he said, because there's been no widely recognized change in the science, he said. Furthermore, it's not likely to change the behavior of the people who most need to wear masks.

"I don't think you can effectively walk that back," he said.

The changes were sure to renew mask debates in school districts across the country.

In South Florida, the Broward County school board postponed a meeting Tuesday about whether students should wear masks in the classroom this fall after about 20 anti-mask protestors refused to don them. The delay angered the protestors, who called on Gov. Ron DeSantis, a strong mask mandate opponent, and the state government to override any mandates imposed by school districts.

"We need a special session of the state Legislature to ban this kind of crap right now," said Chris Nelson, 38, founder of an anti-mask group called Reopen South Florida. He threatened to go to board members' homes to confront them directly.



Zhaequan Brown, 19, gets the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at Lehman High School, Tuesday, July 27, 2021, in New York. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging everyone in K-12 schools to wear a mask when they return to class, regardless of vaccination status. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan



Ariel Quero, 16, left, a student at Lehman High School, reacts after getting the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine from Katrina Taormina, right, Tuesday, July 27, 2021, in New York. Schools Chancellor Meisha Porter applauds behind her. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging everyone in K-12 schools to wear a mask when they return to class, regardless of vaccination status. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Lennihan

"If we can't be heard in public areas, and peacefully, we will go to where they are, and we will let them know how we feel about this, because we will not stand for children being masked for another year," he said.

Walensky said she is aware of the criticisms and concerns, and she acknowledged that many Americans are weary of the pandemic and do not want to return to prevention measures. But she said new scientific information forced the decision to change the guidance again.

"This is not something that I took lightly," she said.

Ken Thigpen, a retired respiratory therapist who now works for a medical device manufacturer, is fully vaccinated and stopped wearing his mask in public in May. But he started to reconsider in the last week after his job took him to hospitals in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida, where he witnessed medical centers getting inundated with COVID-19 patients.

"That delta variant is intense. It is so transmissible that we have to do something to tamp it down," he said.

"I loved it when I could call the hospitals and they said, 'We actually closed our COVID ward today or we are down to two COVID patients,'" he recalled. "And now we are opening the wards back up, and the numbers are going nuts."

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