

San Francisco Bay Area to drop some indoor mask mandates

October 7 2021, by Olga R. Rodriguez



In this Aug. 20, 2021, file photo, host Jason Pryor, right, checks the vaccination and identification cards of diners as they enter the Waterbar restaurant in San Francisco. Indoor masking requirements in the San Francisco Bay Area will be eased for certain indoor public settings, including offices, gyms, college classrooms and churches, once counties reach low COVID-19 case and hospitalization rates and at least 80% of the total population is fully vaccinated, officials announced Thursday, Oct. 7, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File

Several San Francisco Bay Area counties will begin loosening mask requirements for certain indoor public settings, including offices, gyms, college classrooms and churches, once they reach low COVID-19 case and hospitalization rates and at least 80% of the total population is fully vaccinated, officials announced Thursday.

The Bay Area, with among the highest vaccination rates and lowest case rates in the nation, has been cautious since the start of the pandemic, when counties regionwide issued the nation's first stay-home order in March 2020.

After lifting some restrictions in the spring, public health officials in San Francisco, Marin, Napa, Sonoma, Contra Costa, Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo [reinstated an indoor mask mandate in August](#) as COVID-19 infections surged because of the highly contagious delta variant.

Since then, cases have declined, and officials have now agreed to start lifting mask mandates in some public spaces. The 80% vaccination rate includes the entire population, not just those 12 and older who are currently eligible for the shots.

"Indoor masking has helped to lower case counts, hospitalizations and COVID-19 deaths, so we don't want to remove this important layer of COVID prevention too hastily," Santa Clara Health Officer Dr. Sara Cody said.

Such a change is likely weeks away in most areas, although San Francisco will begin easing the rules next week in a system that is likely to again create a patchwork of regional rules.

Christos Frangoulis, owner of the Park Street Tavern in Alameda, said the new rules don't appear to change anything for him immediately, and

he's fine with that.

"I kind of expected we'd be wearing masks until at least the spring, anyway," he said. "I'd much rather have my guests wear masks than have my doors shut again."

In Contra Costa County, where 71% of the entire population is vaccinated, officials said it could be a while before people can actually start taking their masks off, given that vaccines for children ages 5 to 11 have yet to be approved.

"I want to make it very clear, we are not there yet and based on the criteria it will probably take a few more weeks before we can enter a store or restaurant without a mask," Contra Costa County Supervisor Diane Burgis said.

In San Francisco, where 75% of the entire population is fully vaccinated, patrons of a wide array of businesses are already [required to show proof of full vaccination](#), including offices, gyms and college classrooms. Mayor London Breed's office said Thursday that mask requirements will be eased Oct. 15 for those and other settings with fewer than 100 people, as long as everyone can prove they are vaccinated, the place is well ventilated and no children under 12 are present.

Patrons at San Francisco bars and restaurants must still wear a mask inside, regardless of vaccination status, unless they are eating or drinking, Breed said. The mayor last month was seen on video mask-less at a nightclub, in violation of the rules, and later told reporters that she didn't think the rules were reasonable.

"Make sure you are vaccinated because of the requirements but don't feel as though you have to be micromanaged about mask wearing. We don't need the fun police to come in and tell us what we should or

shouldn't be doing," she later said.

At John's Grill in San Francisco, owner John Konstin was trying to figure out whether the new guidelines meant a change for his restaurant—"it sounds like bars and restaurants, we still have to require masks?"

"It's definitely tiring," he said. "But at the end of the day, as long as we're staying safe, and cases are low, and vaccinations are high, it seems like we're doing the right thing here," noting that customers have been overwhelmingly positive about the vaccination requirement.

Indoor masking will also continue to be required at San Francisco retail stores and other shared indoor places such as common areas like elevators, lobbies and restrooms, where people from different workplace settings could interact.

State and federal rules still require masks to be worn on public transportation, in health care facilities, in adult and senior care facilities and at K-12 schools.

In Los Angeles County, the state's most populous, there are no immediate plans to adopt a similar criteria for loosening mask mandates, said Dr. Barbara Ferrer, director of the county's Department of Public Health. She said Northern California counties have much higher vaccination rates overall and different demographics, though she agreed with the rationale behind the guidelines.

"You know, we're still in the middle of substantial transmission, we have a lot of work to do to get to lower transmission rates, and we need to really concentrate on getting more people vaccinated," she said Thursday.

Steve Pyka, owner of Asta Yoga in San Francisco, said it was about time

vaccinated people were allowed to exercise without masks.

Pyka said his students must register online and upload their proof of vaccination, his studio is well ventilated and there is plenty of room for people to keep their distance.

"They're not moving and they're not opening their mouth like in a restaurant or a bar where they could have well over 100 people who do the theater of coming in with their mask on and take it off right away and are talking and sharing drinks and food," he said.

Such strict mandates especially don't make sense with San Francisco's high vaccination rates, he said.

"Instead of enjoying the fact that we live in this place where everybody's kind of doing their part, we're still living with policies that don't seem to match the reality," he said.

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