

Keep wearing masks a while longer, CDC director says

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(HealthDay)—Many states are already dispensing with mask mandates,

but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's director says COVID-19 case and hospitalization numbers in the United States remain too high to ease its [mask guidelines](#).

The agency "still recommends that all schools encourage students to wear well-fitting [masks](#) consistently and while indoors. And that's consistent with our guidance that still also recommends that people mask in public indoor settings in areas of high or substantial transmission," Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a radio interview with WYPR's Tom Hall on Tuesday's edition of the show "Midday," CNN reported.

"Right now, we still have about 290,000 cases every single day, and our hospitalization rates now are higher than they even were at the peak of our Delta surge," Walensky noted. "So in this moment—while we are looking ahead and planning ahead, and we'll continue to evaluate and follow the science—our recommendations are consistent with encouraging students to wear well-fitting masks."

The [CDC](#) says that 99% of counties nationwide still have high levels of coronavirus transmission, and about 108,000 people are currently hospitalized with COVID-19, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data, CNN reported.

"We owe it to our children to make sure that they can safely stay in school. Right now, that includes masking. We've seen outbreaks that have occurred in communities where students were not masked in schools and had to close," Walensky said. "And much of our guidance is based on the amount of community transmission."

While she is cautiously optimistic about COVID-19 case numbers dropping from the peak of the [Omicron](#) surge, Walensky said the numbers are still too high for the CDC to consider lifting any prevention measures, CNN reported.

There is no specific [number](#) of cases that would trigger a change in the agency's guidance.

"I don't necessarily look at a magic number. What I do think is a really important barometer is how our hospitals are doing," Walensky said.

"Are hospitals able to, you know, take care of the car accidents, the heart attacks and strokes that routinely walk in the door because they are not at capacity taking care of patients with COVID-19? And right now across the country, our hospitals are still in crunch mode," she said. "They still have real challenges with capacity."

Walensky pointed out that states and municipalities can set their own policies, and a number of states announced this week that they would drop indoor mask mandates, CNN reported.

Dr. Paul Offit directs the Vaccine Education Center at The Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. He believes that while the pandemic may be showing signs of easing, Americans aren't out of the woods yet.

"Right now, we have about 90% population immunity, meaning people who have either been naturally infected or immunized or both—that's good. We're moving into the warmer climates—that's good. This is really basically, at its heart, a winter virus. The numbers are way down from where they had been—that's good. But you still had 150,000 cases yesterday and 1,000 deaths. That's still a lot of cases and deaths," Offit told CNN.

"So, what I would say is, independent of whether there's mandates or not, I think people should reasonably wear masks when they're indoors for the next few weeks, until we're much farther down than where we are right now," Offit said. "We're almost there, if you could just hang in there for a few more weeks."

The World Health Organization (WHO) agreed with the CDC. People should keep wearing masks indoors, a WHO official said during a social media Q&A session held Tuesday.

"We are recommending to continue to wear masks, particularly when you're in [close proximity](#) with other people, but especially when you're indoors and even if you're vaccinated," Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead for COVID-19, advised.

More information: Find out more about masks at the [CDC](#).

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