

Returning to life without masks in Chicago

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Now that Chicago and Illinois no longer require masks in many places, you may be wondering how to re-enter the world again.

We wanted to share some helpful guidance from Michael Lin, MD, MPH, an infectious disease specialist and associate professor at Rush, on

making smart choices as COVID-19 cases in Illinois are the lowest they have been in months.

Why did the mask mandate end?

COVID-19 levels are low enough that [public health](#) is no longer under threat, and the U.S. health care system is no longer at risk for being overwhelmed, Lin says.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently updated its [guidance](#) on masking based on whether COVID-19 levels in a community are low, medium or high. If you're in a county with a low COVID-19 community level (like Cook and all neighboring counties), you may choose to wear a mask based on your [personal preference](#), informed by your personal level of risk.

"So if you feel like you are vulnerable because of a medical illness or because of an immunocompromised state, then you can certainly elect to wear a mask, and that would protect you," Lin says.

The CDC still recommends wearing a mask if you or a family member is [at high risk for severe COVID-19](#) and you are in an area with a high COVID-19 community level. If your COVID-19 community level is medium, you can talk with your health care provider about wearing a mask.

Am I still protecting myself and others if I choose to wear a mask and no one else does?

Even if people around you aren't masked, opting to wear a mask yourself still provides protection against COVID-19—for you and others.

"Masks still play an important role in both preventing the mask wearer from spreading infections to people who are vulnerable to severe COVID-19 as well as preventing the mask wearer from potentially becoming infected if they're susceptible," Lin says.

Is it safe to go to a restaurant or bar without a mask?

Chicago recently changed its rules so you don't have to show proof of vaccination before going to restaurants, bars and gyms, nor do you have to wear a mask. If you decide to go to one of these places without a mask, the risk for getting COVID-19 is the lowest it has been in months.

"As COVID-19 levels drop, our risk is lowered as well," Lin says. "So the things that we enjoyed in the past without face masks, we can start to do those again."

This includes getting together with friends, which is becoming safer given our low COVID-19 community levels around Chicago. But it's also important to consider your personal situation and remember that low COVID-19 community levels do not mean there are zero risks, Lin says.

Can I run errands now without a mask?

If COVID-19 transmission levels in and around Chicago remain low or drop even further, then it becomes less important to use layers of protection, which include face masking and social distancing, Lin says.

Staying informed about [local levels of COVID-19 transmission](#) can help you make the right decision about which protective measures are right for your family. Still, Lin recommends this important layer of protection for everyone who is eligible: being [up-to-date on your vaccines](#).

Can my family travel safely for spring break?

When choosing to travel, recognize that many U.S. counties still have medium or high COVID-19 community levels.

"Your risk will depend on how much transmission is happening in the place that you're traveling to," Lin says. You can use the CDC's tool to understand COVID-19 risks at your potential destination and inform your personal decisions.

Your risk on vacation also depends on the types of activities that you choose to do, Lin says. For example, going to an indoor waterpark with a lot of strangers carries a higher risk than taking a hike outdoors with your family.

And when you're ready to travel, it's important to continue to follow current public health advice. Right now, [masks](#) are still required for public transportation, including air travel.

Does the end of the mask mandate mean we're at the end of the pandemic?

"We hope that we're getting to the end of the pandemic, but unfortunately, we won't know right away because it does take time to know whether or not there are new variants coming and if they are going to impact us," Lin says. "But we are cautiously optimistic that the COVID-19 pandemic is moving toward the endemic phase." That means COVID-19 would become more like a seasonal flu or cold virus.

How should we handle this awkward period when some people are masked and others are not?

Lin recommends being respectful of others during this time, whether or not they choose to wear a mask.

"We have to understand that it's going to be a personal choice, and it's OK to wear a mask, and in some situations, it's OK not to wear a mask," Lin says. "Everyone will have their own feel for what is right for them."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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