

Japan to drop mask guidance, relax Covid strategy

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Japan's government will drop its recommendation to wear masks indoors and downgrade its medical classification for Covid-19, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Friday.

The changes, effective from early May, will classify the disease on the same level as the flu, down from its current status on par with tuberculosis and SARS.

"As for masking, regardless of indoors and outdoors, the decision will be left up to individuals," Kishida told a televised government meeting.

"We will take further steps towards 'life with corona' and make steady progress on returning to normality in homes, schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods and all facets of life."

Masks are ubiquitous in public places and are commonly worn outdoors as well, despite the government having already said they are not necessary outside in uncrowded settings.

Even before the pandemic erupted in 2020, many people in Japan used masks when they had a cold or hayfever or to ward off illness in the winter.

Polls by major media outlets have indicated that most people will continue wearing masks for public health purposes even if the government lifts its request.

The change means that from May 8—after Japan's "Golden Week" holiday period—Covid-19 patients and their close contacts will no longer have to isolate.

South Korea also plans to drop its indoor masking requirement from Monday, while China has eased its strict zero-Covid stance in a sharp policy reversal.

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