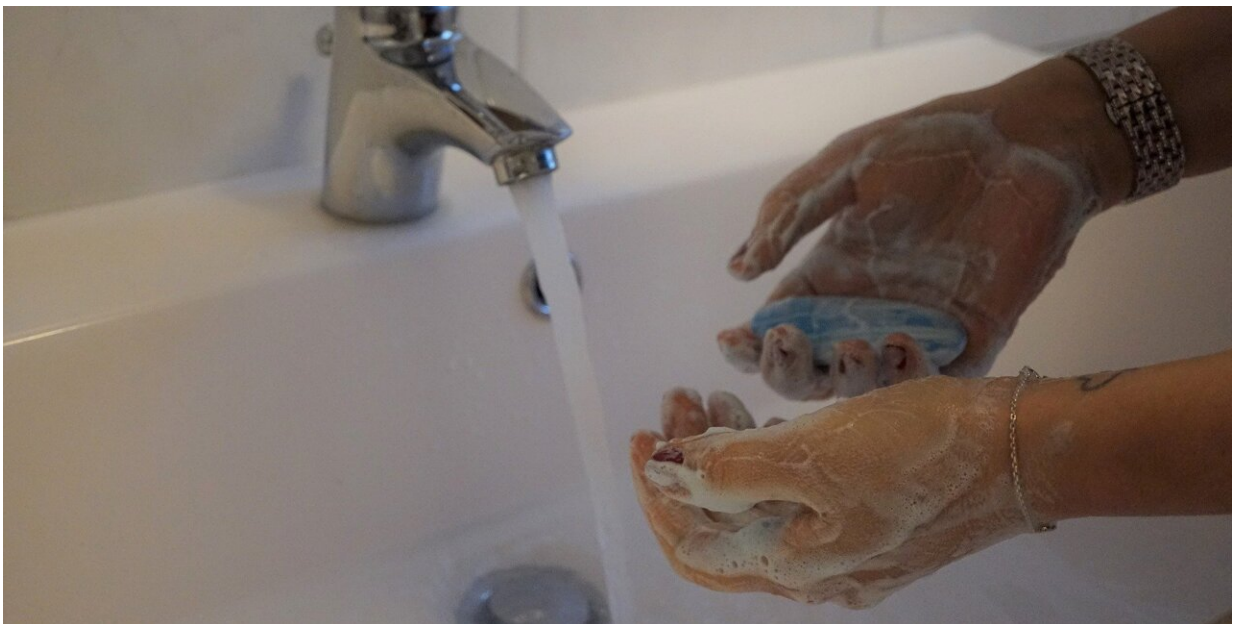


# As COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions relax, what pandemic-era safety measures should we keep taking?

April 18 2023, by Mike Clark

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Remember the precautions you took during the early days of the pandemic? Many of us donned masks and gloves, wiped our groceries down when we brought them inside and finally paid attention to how much we were washing our hands.

As doctors and scientists came to understand COVID-19 a bit better,

their recommendations for safety changed. Most of us stopped wearing gloves everywhere and wiping down our groceries, but we still masked up and kept social distancing among other measures to stay safe.

Now, as COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions relax and life goes on as usual, we again must decide on what pandemic-era safety measures we should keep taking and which ones we can put behind us. John Segreti, MD, epidemiologist and medical director of Infection Control and Prevention at RUSH, has some advice as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Keep washing your hands**

While washing your hands has always been an important way to fight the spread of diseases, it became an essential precaution during the pandemic. Maybe you counted or sang a short song while soaping up to make sure you were scrubbing for long enough.

Just as we should have been washing our hands frequently and thoroughly before the pandemic, we should continue to do so now.

"Wash your hands more rather than less," Segreti says. "And as far as how long? The CDC recommends 20 seconds."

If you're in a hurry and can't spare 20 seconds to get your hands clean, you can use alcohol or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer instead. "The alcohol works just as well and takes a lot less time," Segreti says.

## **Be sensible about social distancing**

Social distancing became the norm during the pandemic. It was pretty common to see signs advising six feet of distance in lines at stores, and

chairs at places that still had seating were spread far apart.

For people who aren't at high risk for serious infections, social distancing may not continue to be as important. But if you are at high risk, you may want to keep your [personal space](#) whenever possible.

"Everyone has to decide what risk they're willing to take," Segreti says. "If you're at higher risk for becoming infected, and more importantly if you do get infected, if you're going to have serious disease, require hospitalization or possibly die, then [social distancing](#) would continue to make sense."

People who are at risk and can't social distance may still want to carry a mask. "If you're at high risk, if you're indoors and in a poorly ventilated, crowded area, you should be wearing a mask," Segreti says. "The better the mask, the better the protection."

## **Assess your risk**

People who were immunocompromised or lived with someone who was during the pandemic had to take extra care because of the higher risk of serious illness and complications. That will likely continue to be the case.

"You should discuss it with your physician," Segreti says. "Someone who's immunosuppressed, like those who've had a recent stem cell transplant or solid organ transplant, should continue to take precautions."

Some of the things at-risk people should do are the same as before the pandemic. "Avoid undercooked meats and eggs, unpasteurized dairy products, that sort of thing," Segreti says. "These are things we were recommending even before COVID."

## **Vaccinate as needed**

Vaccines and boosters became especially important for preventing serious illness during the pandemic, and not just for COVID-19. Many people die of the flu each year, and annual vaccinations can help save lives.

If you made boosters and regular vaccinations a part of your routine during the pandemic, it's still a good idea to keep up with them. Talk to your physician to see which ones might be necessary.

"People certainly should be getting the yearly flu vaccine," Segreti says. "The FDA is discussing whether they will release another COVID-19 booster for the spring of 2023. If they do, it'll probably be targeted to people over 65 or people who are immunosuppressed."

If you are at high risk for these diseases, it's even more important that you stay up to date on your vaccinations.

## **Stay home when you're sick**

Before the pandemic, some of us were guilty of going to work or school when we felt under the weather to avoid using up our days off. The pandemic emphasized the importance of staying home and self-quarantining when we're sick—not just for our own health, but for the safety of others that we might infect.

"It's always been our stance that if you're sick, you should stay home because people die of flu and other respiratory viruses like RSV and adenovirus," Segreti says. "You should test yourself and determine how long you need to be away. But we do not want people going to work when they're sick, especially health care personnel who can spread it to

immunosuppressed patients."

As we move on from the [pandemic](#), we'll probably start to see certain preventive measures fade away. Segreti suggests we'll likely have fewer plexiglass partitions and temperature checks at building entrances, for example. But remember to keep some of the good, safe habits you've formed over the last few years and stop the spread of diseases that can still infect people.

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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