

US to lift most federal COVID-19 vaccine mandates next week

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Pfizer, left, and Moderna bivalent COVID-19 vaccines are readied for use at a clinic, Nov. 17, 2022, in Richmond, Va. The Biden administration will end most of the last remaining federal COVID-19 vaccine requirements next week when the national public health emergency for the coronavirus ends, the White House said Monday, May 1, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Steve Helber, File

The Biden administration will end most of the last remaining federal

COVID-19 vaccine requirements next week when the national public health emergency for the coronavirus [ends](#), the White House said Monday.

Vaccine requirements for federal workers and federal contractors, as well as foreign air travelers to the U.S., will end May 11. The government is also beginning the process of lifting shot requirements for Head Start educators, healthcare workers, and noncitizens at U.S. land borders.

The requirements are among the last vestiges of some of the more coercive measures taken by the federal government to promote vaccination as the deadly virus raged, and their end marks the latest display of how President Joe Biden's administration is moving to treat COVID-19 as a routine, endemic illness.

"While I believe that these vaccine mandates had a tremendous beneficial impact, we are now at a point where we think that it makes a lot of sense to pull these requirements down," White House COVID-19 coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha told The Associated Press on Monday.

Deeply polarizing at the time and the subject of numerous legal challenges—many of which were successful—the vaccination requirements were imposed by Biden in successive waves in late 2022 as the nation's vaccination rate plateaued even amid the emergence of new, more transmissible variants of COVID-19.

More than 100 million people at one time were covered by Biden's sweeping mandates, which he announced on Sept. 9, 2021, as the delta variant of the virus was sickening more people than at any time up to that point in the pandemic. Biden had ruled out such requirements before taking office that January, but came to embrace them to change the behavior of what he viewed to be a stubborn slice of the public that

refused to be inoculated, saying they jeopardized the lives of others and the nation's economic recovery.

"We've been patient. But our patience is wearing thin, and your refusal has cost all of us," Biden said at the time. The unvaccinated minority "can cause a lot of damage, and they are."

Federal courts and Congress have already rolled back Biden's vaccine requirements for large employers and military servicemembers.

Mandates remain for many employees of the National Institutes of Health, Indian Health Service and Department of Veterans Affairs—which implemented their own requirements for healthcare staff and others independent of the White House—will remain while those agencies review their own requirements, the administration said.



A nursing student administers the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination center at UNLV, in Las Vegas, April 26, 2021. The Biden administration will end most of the last remaining federal COVID-19 vaccine requirements next week when the national public health emergency for the coronavirus ends, the White House said Monday, May 1, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/John Locher, File

Over 1.13 million people in the U.S. have died of COVID-19 since the pandemic began more than three years ago, including 1,052 people in the week ending April 26, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That was the lowest weekly death toll from the virus since March 2020.

"COVID continues to be a problem," Jha said. "But our healthcare system or public health resources are far more able to respond to the threat that COVID poses to our country and do so in a way that does not cause problems with access to care for Americans."

He added, "Some of these emergency powers are just not necessary in the same way anymore."

More than 270 million people in the U.S., or just over 81% of the population, have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to the CDC.

For more than a year, U.S. health officials have been eyeing a long-term response to COVID-19 that is more similar to the approach to influenza, with updated shots yearly targeted at the latest strains of the virus—particularly for the most vulnerable. But fewer than 56 million people in the U.S., or 17% of the population, have received a dose of the

updated bivalent boosters that became available in September 2022 and provide better protection against the omicron variants that remain in circulation.

"We don't have a national mandate for flu vaccines in the same way, and yet we see pretty good uptake of flu vaccines," Jha said. "The goal here really is to continue to encourage people to get vaccinated, but I don't think mandates are going to be necessary for getting Americans vaccinated against COVID in the future."

While federal mandates are ending, Jha predicted that some employers, especially medical facilities, may decide to maintain their COVID-19 vaccination requirements. He noted that the hospital where he practices has had a flu vaccine requirement for employees for 20 years.

Jha dismissed concerns that the ending of the international traveler vaccination requirement would increase the risk of a new variant from overseas entering the U.S. Biden has already rolled back virus testing requirements for both American citizens and foreign travelers to the U.S.

Jha said the U.S. was already protected by a traveler genomic surveillance program, which, for instance, tests for different virus strains in aircraft wastewater.

"We think that we are much more able to identify if a new variant shows up in the United States and respond effectively," he said. "And I think that's what makes the need for a vaccine mandate for travelers less necessary right now."

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