

Texas becomes biggest US state to lift COVID-19 mask mandate

2 March 2021, by Paul J. Weber



A mask required sign is displayed on the entrance to a business Tuesday, March 2, 2021, in Dallas. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

Texas is lifting its mask mandate, Gov. Greg Abbott said Tuesday, making it the largest state to no longer require one of the most effective ways to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The announcement in Texas, where the virus has killed more than 43,000 people, rattled doctors and big city leaders who said they are now bracing for another deadly resurgence. One hospital executive in Houston said he told his staff they would need more personnel and ventilators.

Federal health officials this week [urgently warned states](#) to not let their guard down, warning that the pandemic is far from over.

Abbott, a Republican, has faced sustained criticism from his party in America's biggest red state over the statewide mask mandate—which was imposed eight months ago—as well as business occupancy limits that Texas will also scuttle next week. The mask order was only ever lightly enforced, even during the worst outbreaks of the pandemic.

"Removing statewide mandates does not end personal responsibility," said Abbott, speaking from the crowded dining room of a restaurant in Lubbock, surrounded by several people not wearing masks.

"It's just that now state mandates are no longer needed," he said.

The repeals take effect March 10.



A customer exits a store with a mask required sign displayed, Tuesday, March 2, 2021, in Dallas. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

The full impact of Texas' reversal was still coming into focus. Target, one of the nation's biggest retailers, said it would continue requiring customers to wear masks in Texas. Mark Cuban, owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, said he had no immediate plans to change the limits on fans at the American Airlines Center, where the biggest crowd so far this season was about 3,000 spectators.

Restaurant owners began confronting whether they, too, would relax COVID-19 safeguards in their dining rooms that were already allowed to be

almost fully open. School administrators scrambled to figure out the ramifications for the state's 5 million public school students. Local officials will have some ability to impose new rules if cases spike, Abbott said, but those powers will be limited.

"While we've made significant progress, I'd hate to have that go away," said Tinku Saini, the CEO of Tarka Indian Kitchen, which has locations across Texas. He said he would now allow customers to go maskless but still require face coverings for staff.

At Bob's Steak & Chop House in Dallas, founder Bob Sambol welcomed the ability to make decisions for his own restaurant again, even though he has not decided what approach he'll take. "I have a week, thank God," Sambol said.

Abbott joins a growing number of governors across the U.S. who are easing coronavirus restrictions. Like the rest of the country, Texas has seen the number of cases and deaths plunge. Hospitalizations are at the lowest levels since October, and the seven-day rolling average of positive tests has dropped to about 7,600 cases, down from more than 10,000 in mid-February.

Only California and New York have reported more COVID-19 deaths than Texas.



To prevent the spread of Covid-19, travelers wear masks at Love Field Tuesday, March 2, 2021, in Dallas. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

"Absolutely reckless," California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, tweeted in response to Abbott's announcement.

Texas is fully reopening just ahead of the spring break holiday, which health experts worry could lead to more spread. Abbott's rollbacks come just as the U.S. is picking up the pace of vaccinating people—with victory over the virus in sight. In Texas, 7.1% of its nearly 30 million residents have been fully vaccinated, according to state data reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The fact that things are headed in the right direction doesn't mean we have succeeded in eradicating the risk," said Dr. Lauren Ancel Meyers, a professor of integrative biology and director of the University of Texas COVID-19 Modeling Consortium.

She said the recent deadly winter freeze in Texas that left millions of people without power—forcing families to shelter closely with others who still had heat—could amplify transmission of the virus in the weeks ahead, although it remains too early to tell. Masks, she said, are one of the most effective strategies to curb the spread.

The top county leader in Houston, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, said at best the reversal was wishful thinking. "At worst, it is a cynical attempt to distract Texans from the failures of state oversight of our power grid," said Hidalgo, a Democrat.

Dr. Joseph Varon, chief medical officer at Houston's United Memorial Medical Center, said he called the hospital's top leaders immediately after Abbott's announcement and said they will need more staff and ventilators.



To prevent the spread of Covid-19, travelers wear masks as they make their way through Love Field Tuesday, March 2, 2021, in Dallas. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

"I am just concerned that I am going to have a tsunami of new cases," Varon said. "I truly hope I am wrong. But unfortunately history seems to repeat itself."

Early in the pandemic, Abbott stripped local officials of their power to implement tougher COVID-19 restrictions, but now says counties can impose "mitigation strategies" if virus hospitalizations exceed 15% of all hospital capacity in their region. However, Abbott forbade local officials from imposing penalties for not wearing a face covering.

Retailers and other businesses will also still be allowed to impose capacity limits and other restrictions on their own.

Abbott imposed the statewide mask mandate in July during a deadly summer surge. But enforcement was spotty at best, and some sheriffs refused to police the restrictions at all. And as the pandemic dragged on, Abbott ruled out a return to tough COVID-19 rules, arguing that lockdowns do not work.

Politically, the restrictions elevated tensions between Abbott and his own party, with the head of the Texas GOP at one point leading a protest outside the governor's mansion. Meanwhile, mayors in Texas' biggest cities argued that Abbott wasn't doing enough.

Most of the country has lived under mask mandates during the pandemic, with at least 37 states requiring face coverings to some degree. But those orders are increasingly falling by the wayside: North Dakota, Montana and Iowa have also lifted mask orders in recent weeks.



To prevent the spread of Covid-19, a sign directs travelers to wear masks at Love Field Tuesday, March 2, 2021, in Dallas. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

In Texas, it was only last week that emergency restrictions on restaurants and businesses were relaxed in the Rio Grande Valley, which has been walloped by the virus like few other places in America.

"I appreciate Governor Abbott's desire to return to normalcy, but I remain concerned that, at least in Hidalgo County, we may be moving too quickly," Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez said.

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