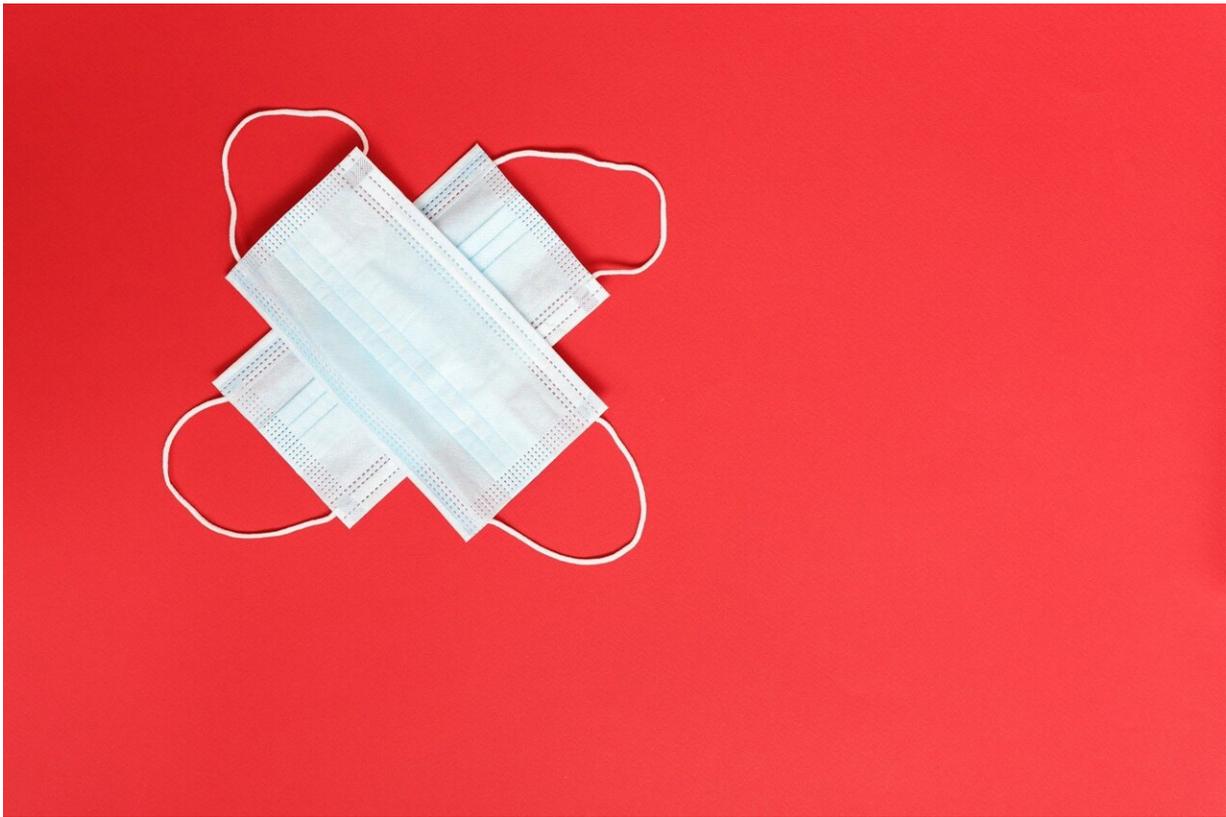


As cases surge, New Orleans 'strongly recommends' masks

July 22 2021, by Kevin McGill



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With the daily average of new COVID-19 cases surging to numbers not seen in months, New Orleans officials issued an advisory Wednesday "strongly recommending" people resume wearing masks indoors, hoping

to avoid the kind of virus-related shutdowns that devastated the city's tourism economy in 2020.

Mayor LaToya Cantrell stopped short Wednesday of requiring mask wearing. She said the advisory being issued "puts the responsibility on individuals themselves," rather than having the city enforce a mandate.

The announcement came as the city posted figures showing the surge, driven by the highly contagious delta variant, has pushed the seven-day average of new cases reported in the city to 117, the highest since early February. It had fallen as low as eight in mid-June but began climbing sharply in early July.

Also Wednesday, Louisiana's health department reported a new case count of 5,388, the third highest since the pandemic began. Hospitalizations for the disease rose to 844 statewide, up more than 600 since June 19.

Dr. Jennifer Avegno, New Orleans' health director, and Dr. Emily Nichols, head of the city's emergency medical services, said the increase in cases has led to a shortage of health care workers. "Our beds are filling up, our providers are working long, hard hours," Nichols said.

The new measures come even as the city boasts a higher vaccination rate than the rest of Louisiana, which lags much of the nation. Wednesday's statistics show more than 55% of the city's population has gotten one vaccination shot, with nearly 51% fully vaccinated, numbers comparable to national figures.

But city officials say the rate is still too low. And with the state's rate down around 36%—and tourists visiting from areas that may not have high rates—officials said it is imperative that more city residents get vaccinated.

Restrictions on gatherings and mask requirements have been greatly eased in recent months as vaccines became widely available.

New Orleans had been a Southern hot spot for COVID-19 early in 2020. Mitigation measures saw the city shut down bars, dine-in restaurants and numerous other businesses vital to the tourist-driven economy.

Restrictions spilled over into this year, when major Mardi Gras events were canceled. The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, which was canceled in 2020, this year was postponed from its usual spring dates until this fall.

As [city](#) officials made their announcement Wednesday, Warner Thomas, President and CEO of Ochsner Health, said at a separate news conference that 313 COVID-19 patients were hospitalized across that system, which has facilities around Louisiana. Most were unvaccinated, he said.

That number is up from 74 four weeks ago, he said, adding that the number of "breakthrough" cases among vaccinated people has risen.

"A month ago we might have seen five breakthrough cases a day with none admitted to a hospital. Today we're seeing about 50 breakthrough cases, with five admitted to a hospital."

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