

CDC says vaccinated should wear masks indoors in U.S. COVID hotspots

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The CDC advised people to wear masks for much of the pandemic in settings where they could not maintain six feet of distance between themselves and others. [File: Brendan McDermid/Reuters]

Atlanta, July 27 (RHC)-- People in parts of the United States where COVID-19 infections are surging should wear masks indoors even if they are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, the country's public health agency has advised.

Citing new information about the ability of the Delta variant to spread among vaccinated people, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Tuesday also recommended indoor masks for all teachers, staff, students and visitors to schools, regardless of vaccination status.

"In areas with substantial and high transmission, CDC recommends fully vaccinated people wear masks in public, indoor settings to help prevent the spread of the Delta variant and help protect others," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky told reporters during an afternoon news briefing.

The U.S. is averaging more than 57,000 coronavirus cases a day and 24,000 hospitalisations, and public health officials for weeks have warned that COVID-19 infections are increasing, especially in parts of the country with low vaccination rates.

Walensky said while vaccinated Americans represent "a very small amount of transmission" – and stressed that the vast majority of new infections, hospitalisations and deaths is occurring among unvaccinated individuals – vaccinated people still have the ability to pass the virus on to others. "With the Delta variant, vaccinating more Americans now is more urgent than ever," she added.

The recent rise in cases comes after mask-wearing and other public health restrictions were loosened, and restaurants, bars and other venues reopened in many parts of the country amid a sharp increase in national vaccination rates.

Before the CDC's announcement, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki confirmed the agency would be revising its guidance based on evolving data and a changing virus. "Our goal is to save their lives, and our responsibility and the responsibility of public health officials is to continue to provide updated guidance ... from an evolving virus," Psaki told reporters.

The new CDC recommendations are not binding and many Americans, especially in Republican-leaning states, may choose not to follow them. "This is not a decision that we ... have made lightly," Walensky said about the new guidelines, acknowledging that many people are frustrated by the ongoing pandemic. "This new data weighs heavily on me, this new guidance weighs heavily on me."

The CDC had advised people to wear masks for much of the pandemic in settings where they could not maintain six feet (1.8 metres) of distance between themselves and others.

In April, as vaccination rates rose sharply, the agency eased its guidelines on the wearing of masks outdoors, saying that fully vaccinated Americans no longer needed to cover their faces unless they were in a big crowd of strangers. In May, the guidance was eased further for fully vaccinated people, allowing them to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

The guidance still called for wearing masks in crowded indoor settings, like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, but it cleared the way for reopening workplaces and other venues.

Subsequent CDC guidance said fully vaccinated people no longer needed to wear masks at summer camps or at schools, either. Coronavirus vaccines are widely available across the US, and 60 percent of adults are fully vaccinated while 69 percent have received at least one dose, according to CDC data. But millions of people remain unvaccinated – and the recent increase in cases is especially pronounced in US states with low vaccination rates, such as Florida.

Dr Anthony Fauci, U.S. President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser, warned during the weekend that the US was moving "in the wrong direction" on the coronavirus – and he urged people to get jabs.

"If you look at the inflection of the curve of new infections," Fauci said in an interview on CNN's State of the Union programme on Sunday, stressing that most infections are among Americans who have not been vaccinated.

"It is among the unvaccinated and since we have 50 percent of the country is not fully vaccinated, that's a problem – particularly when you have a variant like Delta which has this extraordinary characteristic of being able to spread very efficiently and very easily from person to person."

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