

Being Vaccinated Doesn't Mean You Must Go Maskless. Here's Why.

To many people, lifting mask mandates seems hard to reconcile with so many long months of masking and physical distancing and sacrificing our social lives for fear of COVID-19.

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For more than a year, public health officials have repeatedly told us that masks save lives. They've warned us to keep our distance from our neighbors, who've morphed into disease vectors before our eyes.

Now they are telling us that if we're vaccinated, we no longer need to wear masks or physically distance ourselves in most cases — even indoors. To many people, myself included, this seems hard to reconcile with so many long months of masking and physical distancing and sacrificing our social lives for fear of COVID-19.

What is an anxious, pandemic-weary (and wary) soul to do?

First, it's important to stress that the [dramatic rollback](#) of mask-wearing and physical distancing recommended last month by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — a policy [California has adopted](#) starting Tuesday [June 15] as part of a broader reopening — applies only to people who have been fully vaccinated.

Even if you are vaccinated, though, you don't need to change your behavior one iota if doing so makes you uncomfortable.

"Nothing in the CDC guidelines says to stop wearing a mask," says Dr. José Mayorga, executive director of the UCI Health Family Health Centers. "It's a recommendation, but if you choose to wear one, that's OK. You shouldn't be stigmatized."

Mayorga has lost five relatives to COVID, including a favorite aunt, and he knows from personal experience how hard it can be to rush back into so-called normalcy.

"Many people have not been directly impacted by COVID," he says. "But for those of us who have been, it's natural to have concern or fear, thinking, 'Oh, I can take my mask off? But is it really safe?'"

Some people are just cautious by nature and won't be rushing to jettison their masks and rub elbows with unmasked strangers. "I know that, realistically, I can do pretty much anything once I'm fully vaccinated, but mentally it's scary," says 36-year-old Sacramento resident Shannon Albers, who got her second dose of the Pfizer vaccine on May 27. "It's going to be weird, after a year of them drilling into us 'Wear a mask, wear a mask, wear a mask,' to be around a bunch of people who aren't wearing masks."

Early in the pandemic, the CDC said masks were not necessary. Then, it [changed its guidance](#) so emphatically that masks became an indispensable part of our wardrobes. Now the advice has changed again.

"For scientists, it is very understandable that there is this revision of recommendations based on new research," says Roxane Cohen Silver, a professor of psychology, public health and medicine at the University of California-Irvine. "But for the general public, that could sound very confusing."

Early on, many people feared catching the coronavirus from surfaces and even disinfected groceries before putting them away. Now, the virus is believed to spread mainly through the air, and the notion of spraying or wiping down everything you bring into the house seems silly.

We don't know how long the vaccines' protection lasts, but it is increasingly clear that being vaccinated reduces the risk of infecting others.

"Vaccinated people have very little risk of infection; they can do what they want to do," says Dr. George Rutherford, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California-San Francisco. "I think we're in pretty good shape, and I think it's going to be pretty much a disease-free summer."

In California, the [rate of positive COVID tests](#) has dropped from a seven-day average of over 17% in early January, at the peak of the winter surge, to under 1% now. The number of hospitalized COVID patients statewide has fallen from over 22,000 to below 1,300 in the same period.

[Around 46%](#) of Golden State residents have been fully vaccinated, lagging behind numerous other states but ahead of the [national rate](#) of just under 43%. Some millions more have built up immunity after a COVID infection.

As more people get protection, the COVID virus finds fewer susceptible bodies, further reducing transmission and producing a downward spiral in the number of cases.

If you are indoors with other people you know to be vaccinated, you can dispense with masks. Want to cook dinner for a group of vaccinated friends you haven't seen for several months? Carpe diem — and don't worry about wearing masks or sitting spaced apart.

But if you are in a mixed crowd — say, a grocery store — and don't know who's vaccinated, wear a mask, even though your personal risk is low. If the workers are wearing masks, it's a matter of respect to wear one yourself. Some people may be nervous about being there — those who are

immune-compromised, for example, or can't get vaccinated for some other health reason — and they won't know if you've had your shots.

“Forget about the medical benefit,” says Bradley Pollock, associate dean for Public Health Sciences at the UC-Davis School of Medicine. “If you are wearing a mask, people who are not vaccinated don't need to feel uncomfortable around you. So, it's kind of a courtesy issue.”

The presence of children is another good reason to mask up. Most kids ages 12 to 16 haven't been vaccinated yet, and those under 12 can't be, yet. They'll probably have to wear masks in school this fall.

And though children have not been hit by COVID nearly as hard as adults, and are not efficient transmitters of the virus, thousands of kids have been hospitalized with it nonetheless — including [about 4,000](#) nationwide diagnosed with a frightening multisystem inflammatory syndrome.

Mayorga, who is fully vaccinated and has young children, says he wears a mask “to protect them and to model good behavior.”

Public health experts agree that vaccinating as many people as possible, including children, is the way out of the pandemic.

But the rate of vaccinations has slowed recently. One of the biggest contributions you can make to the public good right now is to get vaccinated — and help others do the same.

Some people aren't vaccinated because they lack mobility and can't get to an appointment. Check in with elderly neighbors, and if they haven't been vaccinated and need a ride, offer to drive them. You can also check with your local department on aging, community groups that serve the elderly, public health agencies or hospitals to ask if they are seeking drivers.

Perhaps the biggest impact you can have is persuading friends and loved ones to get the vaccine — and then urging them to persuade others.

If they think the vaccines were rolled out too fast to be safe, tell them that related coronavirus vaccine research has been going on for more than a decade. Point out that hundreds of millions of COVID shots have now been given and serious side effects are rare — and are being carefully monitored by officials.

You might also need to rebut the widespread notion that the vaccine could suddenly produce some terrible, unforeseen health impact a few years down the road. “That just doesn't happen,” Pollock says.

Expect to encounter resistance at first, but be persistent. It can take numerous conversations to assuage anxieties, but your close friends will listen.

“If your best friend tells you they did this, that’s highly influential — more than some talking head,” Pollock says.

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