Why Masking Still Matters
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Eighteen months into the COVID-19 pandemic, as COVID-19 variants spread and the pandemic persists around the world, there are a lot of questions about masking. When do I need to wear a mask? Where do I need to wear a mask? Is masking still needed if I'm vaccinated? In short, to protect those who are most vulnerable and to end this pandemic for everyone, masking still matters — now more than ever.

Key Messages

- **Masks are an essential part of our toolkit against COVID-19.** Face coverings reduce transmission by blocking the spray of droplets from talking, sneezing, coughing, singing, or shouting when worn over the mouth and nose.
- **Vaccinations are vital, but they don't confer 100% immunity, meaning that masks are still** a critical intervention **to protect the unvaccinated — and indeed the vaccinated** — **from contracting and spreading COVID-19.** And, while a COVID-19 vaccine will prevent serious illness and death, the extent to which it keeps people from being infected and passing the virus on to others is still emerging.
- **Consistent mask-wearing is particularly key to reduce the spread of the virus among people who are asymptomatic or are yet to show symptoms.** The evidence suggests that people are the most infectious 48 hours before they develop symptoms.
- **Taking several measures together often provides a result far greater than the sum of their parts**. This is the case with vaccines, masking, hand-washing, ventilation, and other interventions. All help reduce the spread and the severity of this pandemic, together they might actually stop it.
- **Masks help reduce transmission which is key to reduce the risk of new variants.** The more we allow the virus to spread, the more opportunity the virus has to change.
- To be effective, **face mask use must be widespread and consistent over time and across geographies;** infectious diseases like COVID-19 do not stop at borders.
- **Face covering must not be perceived as a temporary measure but become a new social norm.** Wearing a mask should remain the norm for the long-term for anyone with symptoms to protect against the spread of seasonal flu and to help prevent future pandemics.
- In order to achieve widespread understanding of the need for masking, **consistent and clear public messaging on the importance of masking is vital to public adherence to mask wearing.** It is also key for general public trust in public health guidance and measures, including vaccines.

Recommendations

Governments should:
- **Make mask-wearing mandatory** in public indoor or crowded spaces.
- **Make masking a positive choice.** Consistently and repeatedly communicate to the public the behaviors that will save lives. Immunization, handwashing, physical distancing, ventilating buildings and rooms, and mask-wearing can save lives. Celebrate the interventions that save lives rather than positioning them as a burden.
- **Ensure sufficient supplies** of medical and surgical masks for health care workers, including those in low- and middle-income-countries (LMICs).
- **Ensure national consistency** in masking guidance rather than deferring responsibility to local and regional levels, which leads to confusion and can contribute to distrust.

Businesses should:

- **Require and enforce mask-wearing.** Provide clear messaging that those who are non-compliant will not be permitted on the premises — the equivalent of "no shirt, no shoes, no service."
- **Public health officials should provide businesses with consistent and easily accessible health resources** to answer patrons' questions. Coordination is key to enforce mask-wearing regulations and will be more effective if it is backed by local and national policy.

Individuals should:

- **Wear a mask in public.** My mask protects you, and your mask protects me. Get vaccinated, practice handwashing, and social distancing together with mask-wearing and ventilate rooms and buildings.
- **Keep it up.** Sustained mask-wearing in public by a majority of the population will save lives, slow the spread of COVID-19 and help prevent future pandemics.
- **Positively encourage** their family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens to do the same.

The pandemic response is more divided than ever between the haves and the have nots. Yet, as we know, no one is safe until everyone is safe. Great progress has been made on the scientific front since the beginning of the pandemic, but COVID-19 is still raging. As of July 4, 2021, daily infection rate was still over 400,000 globally.[1] With the most virulent variant yet, the Delta variant, causing a higher rate of infections and more severe symptoms in many people, it's vital countries double down on the efforts to stamp out COVID-19 transmission.

On June 25, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) urged fully-vaccinated people to continue wearing masks over concerns about the highly transmissible Delta variant. Some countries far along their vaccination programs have, however, fundamentally misunderstood what being vaccinated means and are prematurely lifting face covering rules. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published new guidance in May allowing vaccinated Americans to take off their masks.[2] Despite 66% of Britons wanting face masks to stay mandatory in enclosed public places[3] and 71% on public transport[4], the UK government is planning to make face-covering voluntary as of July 19, 2021. This is wrong-headed. This approach runs counter to WHO guidance and puts the burden of public health guidance on individuals and businesses, effectively putting the most vulnerable at further risk as COVID-19 cases continue to climb. Although vaccines are quickly reducing infection rates, and severe disease and death, they are not yet sufficient to all-out defeat COVID-19. Even double-vaccinated people can get COVID-19 — and while they are unlikely to die from it or even be hospitalized, they can become ill. Crucially, this means vaccinated people can also carry COVID-19 — often while being asymptomatic — continuing to spread the disease and causing potential harm to others.

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[1] WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, https://covid19.who.int/, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[2] CDC, When You've Been Fully Vaccinated: How to Protect Yourself and Others, Updated June 17, 2021, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[3] Yougov Poll, "And once most restrictions are lifted, do you think face masks should or should not continue to be mandatory in shops and some enclosed public places for a further period of time?" July 5, 2021, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/survey-results/daily/2021/07/05/0275c/2, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[4] Yougov Poll, "Most remaining Covid restrictions are due to be lifted this month (in England and Wales) or next month (in Scotland). Thinking about the current requirement to wear a mask, when most restrictions are lifted do you think…?" July 5, 2021, https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/survey-results/daily/2021/07/05/0275c/1, consulted on July 7, 2021.

That's why masking still matters, now more than ever. Masks are still one of the best tools we have against our common enemy, COVID-19. Dr. Mariangela Simao, WHO assistant director-general for access to medicines and health products summed it up well:

"Vaccine alone won't stop community transmission... People need to continue to use masks consistently, be in ventilated spaces, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, the physical distance, avoid crowding. This still continues to be extremely important, even if you are vaccinated, when you have a community transmission ongoing, ... So, people cannot feel safe just because they had the two doses. They still need to protect themselves."[5]

How does COVID-19 spread?

According to the WHO, SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is transmitted mainly between people who are in close contact with each other. A person can be infected when aerosols or droplets containing the virus, which have been expelled by an infected person when they cough, sneeze, talk, or sing, are inhaled or come directly into contact with the eyes, nose, or mouth. The virus can also spread in poorly ventilated and/or crowded indoor settings, where aerosols remain suspended in the air or travel further. People may also become infected by touching surfaces that have been contaminated by the virus when touching their eyes, nose, or mouth without cleaning their hands.[6]

How can wearing masks slow the spread of COVID-19?

The evidence is clear that masks cut down on COVID-19 deaths.[7] A mask both provides the wearer a physical barrier against external germs, and prevents them from exhaling infectious droplets into the atmosphere and onto surfaces, cutting down on the amount of circulating virus that can infect others. In particular, mask use is a significant protective measure against contagion from infected people who are yet to develop symptoms or don't show any symptoms, and hence are unaware that they may spread the disease. The evidence suggests that people are the most infectious two days before they develop symptoms and early in their illness.[8] An increasing number of studies have found that mandatory mask wearing policies have been associated with reductions in the number or rate of infections and deaths.[9] The WHO continues to recommend mask-wearing even for fully-vaccinated individuals, in particular given the emergence of highly transmissible variants such as the Delta variant.

The risks associated with taking off masks

Although vaccines are effective at preventing disease, especially severe illness and death as well as reducing the risk of people spreading the virus, they do not confer 100% immunity and fully-vaccinated people can still get COVID-19. This means vaccinated people can still carry COVID-19 — often while

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[5] WHO, "COVID-19 Virtual Press conference transcript - 25 June 2021", https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-virtual-press-conference-transcript---25-june-2021, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[6] WHO, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): How is it transmitted?", 13 December 2020, https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Current%20evidence%20suggests%20that,nose%2C%20or%20mouth., consulted on July 7, 2021.

[7] Lynne Peeples, Face masks: what the data say, Nature, 06 October 2020, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02801-8 , consulted on July 7, 2021.

[8] WHO, "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): How is it transmitted?", 13 December 2020, https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted#:~:text=%E2%80%A2%20Current%20evidence%20suggests%20that,nose%2C%20or%20mouth., consulted on July 7, 2021.

[9] John T. Brooks, Jay C. Butler, Effectiveness of Mask Wearing to Control Community Spread of SARS-CoV-2, February 10, 2021, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2776536, consulted on July 7, 2021.

being asymptomatic — continuing to spread the disease and causing potential harm to others. Masks fill in the gaps left by vaccines. Lifting the mandatory mask mandate at this stage of the pandemic when community transmission is still high will leave clinically-vulnerable people and those not yet vaccinated — as of July 5, 2021, only 11.5% of the world population had been fully vaccinated[10] — at the mercy of others' goodwill or having to avoid crowded spaces and to only travel on public transport at quieter times of the day. Similarly, clinically-vulnerable people and those not yet vaccinated may not be able to return to their workplace if others there are not covering their face. Public transport and shop workers will also find themselves particularly at risk of infection. Furthermore, emerging evidence shows that unvaccinated individuals, in particular those not planning to get vaccinated, are the most likely to stop wearing masks[11], further increasing the risk of higher community transmission.

Maintaining measures that help reduce transmission such as face-covering is also key to stop the emergence of new variants. The more we allow the virus to spread, the more opportunity the virus has to change. We have significantly advanced our understanding of what works to fight COVID-19, including through the rollout of safe and effective vaccines. However, the emergence of new COVID-19 variants is putting this progress at risk. Viruses constantly change through mutation, and new variants of a virus are expected to occur over time. Sometimes new variants emerge and disappear. Other times, new variants emerge and persist, such as the Delta variant. This variant spreads more easily and quickly than other variants, which leads to more cases of COVID-19. Although countries far along in their vaccination programs that have been affected by the Delta variant (such as the UK) have so far managed to keep hospitalization and death rates relatively low, a growing infection rate significantly increases the risk of new (potentially vaccine-resistant) variant strains emerging. The more the virus is being transmitted, the greater the risk of mutations and the greater the risk that the vaccines we do have will become ineffective.

Finally, maintaining clear and consistent guidance on COVID-19 measures such as masking is essential for public trust and compliance. Epidemiologists have warned that it is very difficult to reinstate a rule after it has been revoked.[12] Lifting mask requirements too early when community transmission is still high and increasing in many countries is a dangerous gamble as governments may never be able to fully reinstate them. Changing positions on the importance of face coverings and inconsistent guidance on masking earlier in the pandemic also undoubtedly fueled confusion and led to decreased public trust in official guidance on masking as well as other anti-COVID measures, including vaccines.[13]

A patchwork of policies and mixed messages from both political leaders and public-health officials has resulted in confusion, skepticism, and mistrust. Clear and consistent public communication is essential to ensure strong compliance on all COVID-19 interventions, including vaccines. Governments should

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[10] Our World in Data, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations, https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[11] Yougov Poll, Masks or no masks? Vaccinated Americans are still wearing them, June 2, 2021, https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/06/02/masks-or-no-masks-vaccinated-americans, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[12] Lynne Peeples, What the science says about lifting mask mandates, nature, May 25, 2021, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01394-0, consulted on July 7, 2021.

[13] Eileen O'Connor, Challenging Our Assumptions—And Messages—About Vaccine Confidence, The Rockefeller Foundation, April 08, 2021, https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/blog/challenging-our-assumptions-and-messages-about-vaccine-confidence, consulted on July 7, 2021.

ensure masking is widely perceived as both a common-sense measure and an act of national and global social solidarity. Experts agree that as with seatbelt usage, indoor smoking bans, and bike helmet adoption, policy mandates and public behavior change campaigns are the first steps in establishing normative social habits. Wearing a mask should become the new normal — to save lives, help slow the spread of COVID-19 and its damaging variants and help prevent future pandemics. This point is all the more relevant as we look ahead to the flu season. Influenza all but disappeared in 2020 due to masking, travel lockdowns, hand-washing, and physical distancing. With the lifting of masking mandates, public health officials are increasingly concerned with a double burden of the flu and COVID-19 this winter.

There is very little downside to masking

Relative to other anti-COVID-19 measures such as school closures and self-isolation that have far-reaching social and economic implications, masks clearly have more upsides than downsides. They are minimally invasive, safe, inexpensive, and effective. Therefore, while it makes sense to consider lifting some anti-COVID-19 measures that have had a negative impact on society as vaccination progresses, face-covering in crowded public places should be maintained as long as community transmission remains high. Anne Hoen, an epidemiologist at Dartmouth College sums it up well: "wearing masks should probably be one of the last things we stop doing."[14]

Conclusion

Together immunization, ventilation, hand hygiene, social distancing, and mask-wearing are the best tools we have against the disease. No single intervention alone is sufficient to end the pandemic. Face-covering has become increasingly important as lockdowns are eased and people seek a full return to public life. By wearing a mask in public indoor and crowded places, everyone can help slow the spread of COVID-19 and save lives. Ending mask requirements too soon will kick the light at the end of the tunnel further away and unnecessarily cost many lives. The guidance everyone should receive is simple: keep wearing a mask when you are around other people: you will likely be saving one of their lives.

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[14] Lynne Peeples, What the science says about lifting mask mandates, nature, May 25, 2021, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01394-0, consulted on July 7, 2021.