

# Preventing the spread of the coronavirus

## *Physical distancing, masks, vaccines, and other preventive measures*

You've gotten the basics down: you're wearing your mask when you need to, avoiding crowds, and keeping your distance. But you likely still have questions. Does wearing a mask protect you, others, or both? How exactly will physical distancing help? And what do you need to know about the new COVID-19 vaccines?

## **What can I do to protect myself and others from COVID-19?**

The following actions help prevent the spread of COVID-19, as well as other coronaviruses and influenza.

### ***If you are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19:***

- Wear a face mask, [as advised by the CDC](#).
- Maintain at least six feet of distance between yourself and others.
- Avoid large gatherings.
- Socialize outdoors.
- Get vaccinated as soon as you are eligible.

### **Everyone:**

- Wear a mask in public indoor spaces in areas with widespread transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Minimize touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.
- Clean frequently touched objects and surfaces regularly.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water.

## **Why is the CDC asking fully vaccinated people to wear masks again? Where and when do I need to wear a mask now?**

In July 2021, the CDC advised all people — vaccinated and unvaccinated — to wear masks in public indoor places, in areas with substantial or high transmission of the virus. The CDC has always advised unvaccinated people to mask indoors and also advises anyone at increased risk to wear a mask indoors, regardless of the level of community transmission. The change in guidance for people who are fully vaccinated was made amidst increasing numbers of infections and hospitalizations across the country.

One factor driving increased infections is the rise of the Delta variant, which spreads more easily than other variants. The Delta variant is now the dominant variant in the US.

We know that people who are fully vaccinated have a much smaller risk of getting sick if they are exposed to the Delta variant. While they are also less likely to spread the virus, the Delta variant is more capable than the original virus of getting into cells that line the nose, mouth, and throat. Once these variants get inside the cells, they rapidly make copies of themselves, increasing what is called the viral load. That's why people who are fully vaccinated can still carry greater amounts of the Delta variant, making it more likely that they could spread the virus to others.

This is where the new masking guidelines come in. Masks reduce the amount of virus we breathe in and breathe out. Combined with the vaccine, masks provide a one-two punch that reduces the risk of spread — to children who are not yet eligible for vaccines, to people with weakened immune systems, and to others who are unvaccinated.

Masks also provide additional protection for the wearer, even those who are fully vaccinated. Vaccines have been very effective, even against the Delta variant, in protecting against severe infection, hospitalization, and death. However, the Delta variant has led to several breakthrough infections in people who are fully vaccinated, and masks provide another layer of protection.

To check the level of virus transmission in your area, [visit the CDC's COVID Data Tracker](#). Areas with substantial or high transmission appear in orange or red.

## **What outdoor and indoor activities are considered safe? Does it matter if I've been vaccinated? And do I still need to wear a mask?**

In July 2021, the CDC advised all people — vaccinated and unvaccinated — to wear masks in public indoor places in areas of the country with substantial or high transmission of the virus. The CDC has always advised unvaccinated people to mask indoors and also advises anyone at increased risk to wear a mask indoors, regardless of the level of community transmission. The spread of the virus is much less likely outdoors, but you may still consider wearing a mask outdoors in crowded settings.

Whether you're vaccinated or not, you'll need to follow federal, state, tribal, and local laws, and workplace or business requirements around mask-wearing and physical distancing.

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## **What do I need to know about washing my hands effectively?**

[Wash your hands](#) often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom; before eating; after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; and after handling anything that's come from outside your home.

- If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, covering all surfaces of your hands and rubbing them together until they feel dry.
- Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.
- The [CDC's handwashing website](#) has detailed instructions and a video about effective handwashing procedures.

## **How does coronavirus spread?**

The coronavirus spreads mainly from person to person. A person infected with coronavirus — even one with no symptoms — may emit aerosols when they talk or breathe. Aerosols are infectious viral particles that can float or drift around in the air for up to three hours. Another person can breathe in these aerosols and become infected with the coronavirus.

This can happen between people who are in close contact with one another. Droplets that are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes may

land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into their lungs.

Transmission is less likely to happen outdoors, where air currents scatter and dilute the virus, than in a home, office, or other confined space with limited air circulation.

The risk of spread from contact with contaminated surfaces or objects is considered to be extremely low. According to the CDC, each contact with a contaminated surface has less than a 1 in 10,000 chance of causing an infection.

The virus may be shed in saliva, semen, and feces; whether it is shed in vaginal fluids isn't known. Kissing can transmit the virus. Transmission of the virus through feces, or during vaginal or anal intercourse or oral sex, appears to be extremely unlikely at this time.

### **How could contact tracing help slow the spread of COVID-19?**

Anyone who comes into close contact with someone who has COVID-19 is at increased risk of becoming infected themselves, and of potentially infecting others. Contact tracing can help prevent further transmission of the virus by quickly identifying and informing people who may be infected and contagious, so they can take steps to not infect others.

Contact tracing begins with identifying everyone that a person recently diagnosed with COVID-19 has been in contact with since they became contagious. In the case of COVID-19, a person may be contagious 48 to 72 hours before they started to experience symptoms.

The contacts are notified about their exposure. They may be told what symptoms to look out for, advised to isolate themselves for a period of time and to seek medical attention as needed if they start to experience symptoms.

### **What is physical distancing and why is it important?**

The COVID-19 virus primarily spreads when one person breathes in droplets or aerosols that are produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or breathes.

Physical distancing refers to actions taken to stop or slow down the spread of a contagious disease. For an individual, it refers to maintaining enough distance (6 feet or more) between yourself and another person to avoid getting infected or infecting someone else. Directives to work from home, and

canceling meetings and larger events help enforce physical distancing at a community level.

### **What does the CDC's new definition of "close contacts" mean for me?**

The CDC has expanded how it defines close contacts of someone with COVID-19. Until this point, the CDC had defined close contact as someone who spent 15 or more *consecutive* minutes within six feet of someone with COVID-19. According to the new definition, close contact is someone who spends 15 minutes or more within six feet of a person with COVID-19 *over 24 hours*.

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/preventing-the-spread-of-the-coronavirus>