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## Polis ends most Colorado mask requirements, but recommends unvaccinated people still wear them

CDC said Thursday that vaccinated people can safely go maskless in nearly all public settings



David Zalubowski, Associated Press file

In this Oct. 20, 2020, file photo, Colorado Gov. Jared Polis adjusts his face covering bearing the state's new message to encourage residents to protect against COVID-19



during a news conference about the steady increase in cases of the new coronavirus in the state.

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Coloradans no longer are required by the state to wear masks in most public settings, and all remaining statewide public health orders put in place to fight the COVID-19 pandemic will end June 1, Gov. Jared Polis announced Friday.

Polis not only adopted new federal guidance that says vaccinated people no longer need to wear masks in most places, he said the state won't require unvaccinated people to keep wearing facial coverings, either — though it's still recommended they do so in public settings.

"We are going from mask-wearing requirements to mask-wearing suggestions and guidance," Polis said at a news conference announcing the changes.

Local governments and businesses still can elect to require masks, however.

Metro-area counties were taking different approaches Friday.

Denver announced it will align its city-level indoor mask requirement with the state's — but not until Sunday.

The Tri-County Health Department said it will allow its mask order for Adams and Arapahoe counties — Douglas County already opted out — to expire Sunday as previously scheduled, to "allow an additional 24 hours for our counties to fully understand the details of the state's newly modified face-mask order."

And Jefferson County's health department said it's waiting to review the new state guidelines and will either rescind or amend its indoor mask mandate. The agency said it expects to provide an update on Monday.

Under Colorado's revised statewide order, unvaccinated people 11 and older will continue to be required to wear masks through the end of May in Colorado's schools, child care facilities, emergency medical settings, prisons, jails and homeless shelters, Polis said.

Starting June 1, state rules won't require anyone to wear a mask in any settings, though businesses and school districts could still mandate them.



The state on June 1 also will lift the requirement that events attracting more than 500 people get approval from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Polis said. That could mean the return of full-capacity professional sporting events and concerts for the first time in more than a year, though some counties could choose to set their own restrictions.

The announcement comes a day after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [released new guidance](#) that fully vaccinated people could safely go without masks in most public spaces. The agency still recommends that vaccinated people wear masks on public transportation, in hospitals and in crowded settings like prisons and homeless shelters.

New COVID-19 cases in Colorado paused their downward trend in recent days. Coronavirus hospitalizations are falling, but Colorado still is tied with Michigan for the highest rate of new cases compared to population, [according to The New York Times' tracker](#).

The state's [latest modeling report](#) found Colorado is unlikely to experience another major spike this summer, but hospitalizations could start to rise again if people quickly relax their precautions, especially if the pace of vaccinations doesn't pick up. About one in every 81 Coloradans was estimated to be contagious with COVID-19 as of Monday.

It's not entirely clear how removing the mask mandate would compare to the scenario they modeled, said Beth Carlton, an associate professor of environmental and occupational health at the Colorado School of Public Health. The big question is how people who aren't fully immunized interpret the guidance, and whether workplaces keep requiring masks until their employees are two weeks out from their final shot, she said.

Masks are the second-best tool available to prevent COVID-19 infections, behind vaccines, Carlton said.

"For vaccinated people, the rules are different," she said. "The concern is about what unvaccinated people do."

## Governor urges vaccination

Polis urged people who haven't yet been vaccinated to get the shot, especially since control measures like the mask mandate and capacity limits will no longer offer some protection.

"The pandemic is not yet over, but if you are vaccinated, it is largely over for you," Polis said. "This is a matter of personal responsibility."



Colorado's most recent [statewide order](#) had required masks for indoor settings where 10 or more people are present, and fewer than 80% are known to be vaccinated, such as grocery stores, indoor entertainment venues and schools.

The CDC's recommendations were purely advisory, leaving it up to states and other levels of government to set policies for their jurisdictions.

Private businesses can still require customers and staff to wear masks, and Polis asked shoppers to comply if asked to mask up.

"I think you're going to see businesses adopt different models, based on what their customers want," he said. "I think there's enough Coloradans with different preferences that the market will support different choices."

## Concerns from restaurants, workers

Nationally, Target and Home Depot have announced that they will [continue requiring all customers to wear masks](#) for the foreseeable future. Trader Joe's, Costco Walmart and Sam's Club have said [only unvaccinated people need to mask up](#).

It's not clear how stores will determine if customers can safely go without masks, and the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which represents about 1.3 million people working in food processing and retail, [said the ambiguity creates problems](#).

"Millions of Americans are doing the right thing and getting vaccinated, but essential workers are still forced to play mask police for shoppers who are unvaccinated and refuse to follow local COVID safety measures. Are they now supposed to become the vaccination police?" UFCW International President Marc Perrone said in a statement.

The Colorado Restaurant Association also raised concerns about how staff will determine if a customer can safely be unmasked when not eating and drinking.

"Given that, as of today, less than half of Denver's population is fully immunized, this new mask guidance puts restaurants in a difficult position, expecting restaurant workers to manage their guests based on vaccination status. That is not the role of restaurant workers in our communities," association president and CEO Sonia Riggs said in a statement.

Dr. Rich Besser, a former acting director of the CDC who is now president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, [told NBC News](#) that it would be impractical to enforce a mask mandate only on unvaccinated people.

"It will be the honor system. If they decide not to wear a mask, the risk is primarily to themselves," he said Friday morning.



The CDC still recommends that people who haven't been fully vaccinated keep wearing masks indoors, or at outdoor gatherings with other people who aren't fully vaccinated. It also advises people with compromised immune systems to talk with their doctors before they stop wearing masks, because their bodies may not have responded to the vaccine.

## Some plan to keep wearing masks

Coloradans' reactions varied, with some saying they'd ditch their masks as soon as possible and others planning to keep wearing them.

Riley Mancuso, of Boulder, said he will keep wearing a mask in public as protection against new variants of the virus, as well as more common illnesses like the flu.

"If the pandemic ends, I will probably be comfortable removing my mask if someone I'm interacting with asks me to — I do human-facing work and can appreciate the argument that facial expressions make communication easier and put people more at ease. But it won't be my default choice," he said.

Jesus Arroyo, of Englewood, said he plans to take a middle path, now that he and his wife are vaccinated. Both have conditions that compromise their immune systems, so they've rarely gone out since the pandemic began and always wore masks, he said.

"While I won't wear my mask everywhere all the time, 24/7, always, like I did in 2020 the ridiculously few times I went out, I will absolutely keep wearing it in crowded places," he said. "Indoor festivals, like the home and garden show whenever it comes back. Indoor or outdoor concerts, just anywhere where I'm in close proximity to lots of people."

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[Report an Error](#) Meg Wingerter has covered education at The Denver Post since February 2019. She previously worked at The Oklahoman, Kansas News Service, The Topeka (Kansas) Capitol-Journal and The Muskegon (Michigan) Chronicle. [Submit a News Tip](#)



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