

Why People Aren't Wearing Masks Anymore

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You've probably noticed more maskless faces than usual! Fewer people are wearing masks since the provincial government made them optional in many (but not all!) places.

Most masking regulations ended on March 21.* After the province announced this, the City of Toronto changed its masking by-law so it would expire on the same day.

This article will start by describing the places where masks will still be necessary and where they are not. Then, I will share why many doctors in Ontario are against this policy change. At the end of the article, I will share three things you can do to protect yourself. If you're interested, there is also a section about how you can get involved in changing policies that affect people with disabilities.

New Rules on Wearing Masks

Remember that you can always choose to wear a mask wherever you go. The main difference is that everyone can now choose if they want to wear a mask in most places.

Wearing a mask is now **optional** in schools, businesses, retail stores, malls, restaurants, bars, gyms, community centres, museums, libraries, and places of worship (e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras, and more).

Wearing a mask is **still required** in places that you visit to receive healthcare. You need to wear a mask in hospitals, doctor's offices, community health clinics, psychiatric facilities, vaccination clinics, laboratories, and specimen collection facilities.*

Only employees and contractors are still required to wear masks on-site at organizations that provide home care and community care.* This means that masks are **optional** for the employees of home care agencies who come into your home.

If you receive homecare that is organized by the province, such as homecare provided through the Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), it's very likely that employees do not need to wear a mask. However, if you receive homecare from an agency, that agency might have a policy that makes wearing a mask mandatory for all employees. This is because "businesses and organizations may choose to implement their own rules related to masking."* Click [here](#) to learn how to contact your agency to ask about their policies.

Wearing a mask is **still required** in Long-Term Care (LTC) homes and retirement homes.* Masks are also **still required** in places where many people live in the same building and receive care and services related to their medical needs and/or social needs.* Examples

include supportive housing for people with disabilities, shelters for survivors of domestic violence, and shelters for people who are experiencing homelessness.

Wearing a mask is **still required** on the train, bus, streetcar, or subway.* The provincial government's website states that masks are **still required** in indoor areas.* However, according to Toronto Public Health, wearing a mask is **optional** in the “non-transit areas” of public transportation, e.g. in the concourse area at Union Station where you wait for the buses and/or trains. The City of Toronto strongly encourages people to wear masks in crowded indoor facilities where there may be people who are more vulnerable to severe illness from COVID-19.

For people in some situations, masks are **still required** whenever you are in public. This includes:

- 10 days after you are exposed to someone with COVID-19. In other words, when you are a “close contact.”
- 14 days after you return from international travel
- During their five days of isolation after testing positive. If you do not have any symptoms by the end of your self-isolation period, you can return to everyday activities without restrictions. After these five days, masks are **optional** but strongly encouraged.*

Criticisms

Many healthcare workers are very upset by this change. Dr. Amit Arya, a palliative care physician, shared specific critiques during a panel hosted by the Disability Justice Network of Ontario. Click [here](#) to watch a video recording of that panel on Facebook.

This doctor spoke on behalf of the coalition called Doctors for Justice in Long-Term Care, which represents over 1,000 doctors, researchers, and advocates across Ontario. He said that, during the recent Omicron wave, “I actually looked after people who were receiving home care who were suffering greatly without actually any care at all because so many staff were off sick.” He argues that this is because the province did not make it mandatory for home care employees to get vaccinated, and did not provide them with N95 masks and increased rapid testing (unlike Long-Term Care employees) ([10:09-10:37](#)).

Dr. Arya calls the removal of mask mandates “counter to the science” ([11:02-11:08](#)). He notes that “The end of mask mandates is not tied to objective indicators” ([11:09-11:13](#)). This means that the government did not make this decision because the province reached a milestone that shows we are in a better position than before. An example of a milestone would be a significant drop in the number of people in hospital with the virus.

In fact, Dr. Arya observes that “Masks were introduced when we had about 180 cases in this province and test positivity was 0.8%. Now, we’re removing masks when it’s estimated that we have 12,000 cases and test positivity is 11.2%” ([11:13 -11:30](#)). He made this statement on March 10, the day after the provincial government’s announcement to end mask mandates. As mentioned above, most masking regulations ended on March 21. The most current data

from Public Health shows that, as of April 17, 2022, Ontario's seven-day average is over 3,200 new cases per day, and its positivity rate is close to 20% ([Pages 4 & 5](#)).

Ways to Protect Yourself

Although other people's choices make going outside riskier than before, isolating at home is not your only option to stay safe.

1. Keep Wearing Your Mask

Wearing a mask is especially important if you:

- are at higher risk of getting very sick from COVID-19
- live, work or spend time with someone who is at higher risk of COVID-19, such as someone who is immunocompromised or is a senior
- will be in a crowded indoor setting with poor ventilation*

Throughout the pandemic, we have been told that we all need to wear masks for them to be effective because wearing a mask protects others from being infected by us. In other words, "My mask protects you. Your mask protects me."

However, recent messaging from the province's Science Table and the Chief Medical Officer have shown that the message has changed. Now, they state that masks are an important layer of protection for both the person wearing the mask as well as other people.*

2. Consider Your Mask

How are you wearing your mask? Does it fit your face, or are there any gaps? The Omicron variant and its variants travel through the air, so if your mask is not well-fitted to your face, you could inhale the virus even when you are wearing a mask.*,*

Any mask is better than no mask at all, but some masks provide better protection than others. Now that fewer people are wearing masks, you might want to consider the type of mask that you wear. Click [here](#) to read about the different types of masks.

3. Consider Your Destination

When we leave home, we are encouraged to "assess our risk". But what does that mean?

Essentially, it means to think about yourself and where you are going. Wearing a mask is one layer of protection, but it is not the only one.

Think about yourself:

- your vaccination status
- your health conditions
- your health at that moment: Do you feel any symptoms?
- your chances of becoming very sick if you get infected with COVID-19

Think about where you are going:

- Will it be crowded?
- Will it be indoors?
- Will it be well-ventilated?
- Where am I going after that event? For example, you may want to make different choices about where you will go when you know that, in a few days, you are going to be around someone who is likely to get very sick if they are exposed to COVID-19.

This information comes from Dr. Alexa Caturay of Toronto Public Health. Toronto Public Health is working on developing tools to help you assess your risk. We will share them as soon as they are available!

Ways to Get Involved in Policy Change

It is extremely valid if you are satisfied with taking care of yourself and do not want to get involved in anything else. Feel free to skip to the 'Final Thoughts' section. If you want to try and change this policy by sharing your thoughts and concerns, keep reading!

The provincial government does not have as many options for public engagement as the municipal government does. You can reach Toronto City Council through the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee (also known as TAAC). These committee members are community advocates for people with disabilities, and many of them have disabilities, too.

You can share your concerns with TAAC either in the form of an email or a public deputation, which is the official name for a speech to a committee.* Click [here](#) for more information about both of these options. Click [here](#) for great tips on the process of creating and presenting a deputation.

TAAC creates recommendations based on the concerns they hear from people with disabilities in Toronto. Those recommendations go directly to the Mayor's Executive Committee, which has a lot of influence at City Hall as every member is a Chairperson of a Standing Committee.

If you enjoy work like this, you can apply to be a member of TAAC! This committee is looking for new members to start after the municipal election in October 2023. In this position, you will be able to influence the City's programs, policies, and the strategic direction. You can advance motions, initiate reports, bring staff to the committee to ask them questions to make sure that they are doing their work well. Click [here](#) to learn more. At the very bottom of that same page, you can find the online version of the application form and the option to print its paper form.

Final Thoughts

The team at North Yorkers and I understand that this announcement is causing a lot of people stress and anxiety about their health and safety. If you want to talk with someone or try to work through these feelings on your own, these resources can help.

Click [here](#) to explore free and low-cost programs funded by the province, which you can do in real time or at any time. That link also includes information about BounceBack, a free skill-building program to manage symptoms of mild to moderate anxiety and/or depression. It's not a counselling line, but they will help you overcome these symptoms and gain new skills via telephone coaching, workbooks, and online videos. It's free to anyone in Ontario who's 15 years old and older.

Also, there are a number of crisis lines across Ontario. Click [here](#) to search for resources in your area. If you feel overwhelmed by the number of resources, contact [ConnexOntario](#) and they can help you navigate the system and provide information about counselling services and support services in your community. You can now get help from ConnexOntario over text!* Text "CONNEX" to 247247. The first few texts are automatic so that they can direct you to the appropriate person. After that, a system navigator will connect with you to discover the options available. You can also still call them at 1-866-531-2600 or email them.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675