

## **Why We Still Have to Wear Masks**

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The sun is out, temperatures are high, and the last thing we want is to be wearing another layer of clothing, especially on our faces. You may be wondering, why are health experts still recommending that we wear masks inside or when we can't distance ourselves from each other, even if we're fully vaccinated?

When the provincial government announced details about exiting Step 3, they made it clear that masks will be here to stay going forward.\* This article will outline the current rules and explain some reasons as to why keeping our masks on is in everyone's best interest.

### **What are the current rules on wearing masks in Step 3?**

When announcing the move into Step 3, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore emphasized that we must keep wearing masks in all publicly accessible indoor spaces.\* The only indoor services that allow you to take off your mask are indoor dining (when you're at your table) and personal care services that need the mask to be taken off, such as the dentist or barber.\*

### **Who doesn't have to wear a mask?**

According to Subsection 2 (4) of the Roadmap to Reopen, the requirement to wear a mask or face covering does not apply to people who:

- have a medical condition that negatively affects their ability to wear a mask or face covering;
- can't put on or remove their mask or face covering without another person's help;
- is being reasonably accommodated in accordance with the Human Rights Code;
- is receiving residential services and supports in a residence listed in the definition of "residential services and supports" in subsection 4 (2) of the Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act, 2008;
- are children younger than 2 years old;
- attend 1) a school or private school that's following specific guidelines 2) a child care program at a place that's following specific guidelines, 3) a day camp or overnight camp for children that's following specific guidelines;
- work in an area that is not accessible to members of the public, as long as everyone keeps at least two metres apart from every other person while indoors.\*,\*

There are more specific conditions where you can be allowed to not wear a mask, and you can read them [here](#) under Subsection 2 (4). Everyone else will have to wear a mask that covers their mouth, nose, and chin.

## **If masks prevent the spread of COVID-19, why aren't they mandatory in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, & the United States?**

It's true that masks are no longer *mandatory* in these places. A spokesperson for Ontario's Minister of Health said: "As the Delta variant is the dominant strain in Ontario, which is not the case with some other provinces, face coverings will also continue to be required for indoor public settings."\*

### British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba

Currently, in all of these provinces, wearing a mask is no longer mandatory, but they are still recognized as an effective way to protect yourself and others from the virus. These three provincial governments recommend that people who aren't fully vaccinated continue wearing masks in indoor settings where they can't keep apart.\*

### Alberta

A few weeks ago, Alberta announced that it's no longer mandatory to wear masks at the same time it lifted almost all of its public health restrictions.\* This plan has been called "risky" by some infectious disease specialists who say that a fourth wave will probably happen in the fall, especially because of the Delta variant.\*

In his comments on Alberta's plan, Dr. Alon Vaisman said: "It's something that we would probably be doing a little bit down the road, but given where they're at now – the case counts rising – it's very early to be withdrawing those kind[s] of restrictions in the era of the Delta variant."\*

### The United States

The United States got a lot of media coverage for removing the requirement to wear masks. Some states stopped wearing them as early as March. In May, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, also known as the CDC, announced that people who are fully vaccinated do not have to wear a mask anymore. This is because the vaccination rates were up and the number of cases were down.

However, after some months of masks no longer being mandatory, there has been a large increase in COVID-19 cases, and the CDC changed their advice!\*

Now, the CDC recommends that both vaccinated and unvaccinated people wear masks indoors in communities with high case counts.\*

The CDC made this decision after reviewing research that showed that "vaccinated people who get infected with the Delta variant can spread it to others, even if the vaccinated don't get

seriously ill.”\* Wearing masks protects people who are unable to get vaccinated based on health conditions and age.\*

One state governor, who had approved and defended “a statewide ban on face mask mandates earlier this year” said that he now regrets it, and he “has called the state Legislature into a special session in an effort to amend the law.”\* This was the Governor of Arkansas Republican Asa Hutchinson.\* On the same day as his comments (Tuesday, August 3), there were more than 50,000 COVID-19 patients across the U.S., which is more than three times the amount of hospitalized people one month ago.\*

## **Final Thoughts**

Every region has their own guidelines, and it’s not always clear why some regions are doing what they’re doing. While there are places where masks aren’t mandatory anymore, Ontario is not the only one that’s enforcing wearing masks. Quebec is also following the CDC’s new advice for everyone to wear masks indoors in areas that have high rates of COVID-19.\*

And case counts are going up in Ontario due to the Delta variant. Because of this, Dr. Peter Jüni, the head of Ontario’s science advisory table, says that he does not support lifting public health restrictions any more than they already are.\*

“Right now just looking at everything and talking to my colleagues we can’t see any further reopening, considering that our effective reproduction number is at 1.5,” Dr. Jüni said.\* “We need to be very careful that we don’t have further explosive growth.”\* In other words, based on the rate that the virus is reproducing at, he believes that moving out of Step 3 could result in even higher case counts, even if we still wear masks.

Dr. Moore supports lifting restrictions, but he says that he will keep wearing a mask because even fully vaccinated people can get infected with the Delta variant.\* “It will be my advice, my personal advice as the Chief Medical Officer of Health, to continue wearing a mask. I’ll certainly wear one on the subway, on a bus, on the train throughout this winter,” he said.\*

For the time being, no matter what the rules are, choosing to wear a mask or face covering is one of the best things that we can do to protect ourselves and others from the virus and its variants. However, while masks are a significant part of the solution, the most important part of the way out of the pandemic is getting fully vaccinated as soon as possible, especially before temperatures drop.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://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