



MEDIA ADVISORY

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Joint Statement from Local Health Officers on Need for Masking in Indoor Spaces

BELLINGHAM, WA -- Today, the health officers of all 35 local health jurisdictions in Washington joined together to give their best public health advice for protecting the public from COVID-19. The health officers recommend all residents wear facial coverings when in indoor public settings where the vaccination status of those around you is unknown. This [joint statement](#) reinforces the urgency of the current federal and state recommendations to wear masks in areas with substantial to high transmission of COVID-19.

“While vaccinations are our best defense against COVID-19, it takes up to six weeks to get fully vaccinated, depending on which vaccine you get,” said Dr. Greg Stern, Whatcom County health officer. “Masking provides an immediate and effective layer of protection. With this new surge driven by the highly transmissible Delta variant, we should all be thinking about reducing risks by both masking and being vaccinated, not one or the other.”

In Whatcom County, 14-day case rates quadrupled between July 4 and August 9, from 45 cases per 100,000 to 190 cases per 100,000. Case rates among all age groups are on the rise, with the highest rates in the past month consistently in the 25-44 year-old age group (as of August 7, the 14-day case rate was 302.6 cases per 100,000).

As COVID-19 surges, masking and vaccination will prevent transmission in a much less restrictive way than a return to decreased business occupancy, capacity or closures. When everyone wears masks, businesses and organizations can ensure that unvaccinated persons are using masks, as required by order of the Washington State Secretary of Health, without verifying vaccination records.

FAQs

Where does this recommendation apply?

Anyone over the age of 2 is encouraged to mask up if they are entering an indoor space that is open to the public. This includes retail, grocery stores, government buildings, or other businesses or places where members of the public can enter freely. If you are in an indoor space or a crowded outdoor

setting where you cannot be certain those around you are fully vaccinated, we encourage you to mask up. Masks add another layer of protection to what vaccination has already given you.

What does this mean for businesses?

This is not a new or separate mandate for businesses, which must still comply with statewide mask requirements and should be requiring masks for unvaccinated individuals in public indoor spaces. However, we are encouraging businesses to ask all individuals to mask up when entering in order to help protect workers and customers, particularly if they are unable to verify vaccination status of everyone who enters their establishment.

If the vaccines are so effective, why do vaccinated people need to mask up?

The vaccines are highly effective, and this recommendation does not challenge that fact. No vaccine is 100 percent effective at preventing illness. Those who are fully vaccinated are less likely to become ill with COVID-19, and much less likely to become hospitalized or to die if they do become ill.

Still, vaccinated people can get COVID-19. These are called breakthrough cases, and we know there is a small percentage of COVID-19 cases among vaccinated people in Washington. So even though you are at least 10 times less likely to get COVID-19 or have a severe illness if you are fully vaccinated, you still can get sick and potentially spread it to others. Well-fitting, multi-layer cloth face masks reduce spread of infectious droplets by up to 70-80%. These same masks also reduce the risk of inhaling infectious droplets from others by up to 50%. In short, mask wearing protects you and those around you.

As case rates rise, and as we continue to learn more about the highly transmissible Delta variant, masking is an extra layer of protection that the health officers are encouraging for everyone when in public indoor spaces, regardless of vaccination status. Vaccination, mask wearing, good ventilation, and hand hygiene: we need them all to keep bad health and economic consequences of this Delta strain at bay.

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