Masks or mandates: With vaccination rates slowing, experts say it was a matter of time

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It seems like a far cry from President Joe Biden's push for a "summer of freedom." Two and a half months after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said fully vaccinated people could ditch masks and return to relatively normal lives, the agency is urging everyone to mask up indoors again in areas of the country with high rates of virus transmission.

With less than half of the U.S. population fully vaccinated and the highly transmissible delta variant taking hold across the country, health experts said it was only a matter of time.

"There were warning signs that we were heading for a change in policy as we saw the waning vaccination rates but we did not necessarily see waning cases and hospitalizations in [certain] areas," said Rachael Piltch-Loeb, a research associate and preparedness fellow at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "So, we had an indicator that we had not gotten enough of the population vaccinated."

The CDC officially updated its mask recommendations Tuesday to say that fully vaccinated individuals should continue covering their faces indoors in areas of "substantial or high transmission." The guidance came as local jurisdictions sought guidance amid a resurgence of COVID-19 and cities including Los Angeles and St. Louis reimposed mask orders.

As of Thursday, two-thirds of U.S. counties were in the red or orange on the CDC map, indicating substantial or high transmission — or over 50 COVID cases per 100,000. Less than 10% of counties showed low rates of transmission. Most of those counties are in states with over 60% of the population fully vaccinated.

Officials pleaded with people to get vaccinated. States offered million-dollar jackpots. Businesses gave bonuses and time off. Community leaders went door-to-door and neighborhood pharmacies offered them on the spot. Yet, 90 million eligible Americans still haven't gotten a shot and amid a "pandemic of the unvaccinated," the White House is pushing mandates.

On Thursday, President Biden announced that all federal workers and contractors would need to prove they are vaccinated or be subject to weekly COVID-19 testing, social distancing and mask use on the job. More than 4 million people work for the federal government making it the country's largest employer.

"With incentives and mandates, we can make a huge difference and save a lot of lives," Biden said, urging others to follow the federal government's lead.

The president asked states to offer $100 in cash to people who get vaccinated and said employers would be fully reimbursed for providing time off for workers and their families to get shots. He indicated top business leaders at the Chamber of Commerce and Business Roundtable supported his vaccine mandate.

Biden's announcement came as more institutions resolved that vaccine mandates could be the country's best bet to defeat the virus.

Two days earlier, the Department of Veterans Affairs required all of its frontline health care workers to be vaccinated. President Biden ordered the Department of Defense to look into adding the COVID vaccine to the list of mandatory shots for active-duty servicemembers.

Public workers in California and New York City, where COVID cases are again surging, were given an option this week to either get vaccinated or face regular COVID testing. More than 600 colleges and universities are requiring students to be vaccinated before returning to campus in the fall.

Employees at Google and Facebook were told they had to prove they were vaccinated to return to the office. Other companies including United Airlines, Delta, Morgan Stanley, Wells Fargo and Goldman Sachs are requiring workers to get shots.

More hospitals and health care facilities announced they would require employees to get shots. Last week, the American College of Physicians called on all health care and long-term care employers to require workers to get the vaccine.

Research has demonstrated that vaccine mandates work. The Justice Department and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has upheld the legality of employer vaccine mandates. Several federal judges have ruled recently that schools and employers can require COVID vaccinations.

"We've tried various carrot and stick approaches and I think the reality is people are most likely to engage in a behavior when there's a path of least resistance," said Piltch-Loeb. For instance, getting a shot over wearing a mask and submitting to regular testing. "Given that we are expecting people to go back to in-person working sooner rather than later, adding vaccine mandates as part of employment or as part of an occupational environment makes a lot of sense."

The idea has been controversial in recent months, but as fewer people respond to vaccine incentives, more Americans appear to be warming up to mandates. A new Morning Consult poll found 3 in 5 adults believe that federal, state and local governments or schools and businesses should require vaccinations. Respondents were sharply divided, though. Vaccinated individuals were more than two and a half times as likely to favor mandates as the unvaccinated.

Shots remain the strongest tool available to combat the virus with masks and social distancing serving as additional, proven mitigation measures. Yet, some health policy experts worry that by reintroducing mask recommendations, the CDC is sending the wrong message about vaccine efficacy.

The CDC's decision "stoked fears in some it stoked confusion and mistrust among others," said Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

The new guidance was based on unpublished data that indicated people who are vaccinated and have breakthrough, symptomatic COVID-19, can spread the virus to unvaccinated people, including unvaccinated children and the immunocompromised.

"What this is telling already hesitant people is, 'You see, the vaccine doesn't even work. You've got to wear a mask when you go indoors,'" he said in an interview Thursday with The National Desk. "For the people who have gotten vaccinated, they're thinking, 'Now I'm having to put a mask on basically to protect the unvaccinated from themselves.' It doesn't seem fair."

Despite recent alarm over breakthrough COVID infections, the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA shots and the Johnson & Johnson adenovirus vector vaccine are highly effective, including against the delta variant. The mRNA vaccines were over 94% effective in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 when tested against the original alpha variant. All the vaccines have proven to prevent serious illness, hospitalization or death in most cases.

The vaccines have proven ineffective in only a small fraction of cases. The overwhelming majority of infections are currently transmitted to and from unvaccinated individuals.

The fact that the CDC has recommended masks in areas of high transmission is not an indication that the vaccines are less effective against the delta variant, Piltch-Loeb emphasized. "It's an indication that we do not have enough vaccinated people and we continue to have community spread."

According to an internal CDC document obtained by ABC News, there were approximately 153,000 symptomatic breakthrough cases of COVID-19 reported by mid-July. That number represents less than 0.1% of all vaccinated people. Less than 0.005% of vaccinated people have developed COVID cases that led to hospitalization or death.

The return to masking has sparked frustration, confusion and, in some cases, exacerbated mistrust. Jonathan Metzl, director of the department of medicine health and society at Vanderbilt University, argued that the CDC was not being "wishy-washy," but adapting to a dynamic situation.

"It's not like anybody wants to wear a mask," Metzl said. "But if tons of people around you start getting sick or if you start getting sick, the reality changes —not because of some conspiracy but because the virus itself is changing the rules."

Understanding the facts of a fast-moving pandemic has proven difficult. To further complicate the situation, the CDC's response to resurgent COVID cases sparked a political backlash among conservatives.

Former President Donald Trump lashed out at the new mask guidance. "Don't surrender to COVID. Don't go back!" he wrote in a statement Wednesday.

In Congress, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi reimposed the congressional mask requirement after the Office of the Attending Physician urged mask use inside the Capitol to prevent the spread of the delta variant.

Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., argued the return of masks was "not a decision based on science" and claimed Democrats were instituting "a perpetual pandemic state."

Pelosi responded to the attack calling McCarthy "a moron."

Republicans flouted the new mask guidance on the House floor. Freshman Colorado Rep. Lauren Boebert reportedly threw a mask at a staffer who asked her to wear it.

Rep. Chip Roy of Texas warned new mask guidelines would breed resentment. "The American people are fed up. They want to go back to life," he said on the House floor Wednesday.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., tweeted that "forcing masks undermines public trust in vaccines." In an interview with Breitbart, she argued that a mask mandate "gets in the way" of getting people vaccinated. If it means they have to continue following strict precautions, she noted, "Then what is the benefit?"

Democratic Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota argued that the mask requirements wouldn't be necessary if more Americans were willing to be vaccinated. "None of us are happy with having to wear masks," Phillips said in a statement to The Daily Beast. "If more Americans would get vaccinated and listen to science instead of conspiracy theorists—including certain Members of Congress—we could save lives, improve our economy, and probably not be subject to such requirements."

On Thursday, President Biden urged people to set politics aside and get vaccinated. "It's not about red states and blue states. It's about life and death," he said.