



'We're not crying wolf here': CDC releases data, defends new mask guidance

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Vaccinated people infected with the delta variant of COVID-19 might be able to transmit the virus to others as easily as the unvaccinated, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday, though breakthrough infections appear to remain relatively rare.

The agency released new data days after it reversed its stance on masks, advising even those who are vaccinated to cover their faces indoors in areas with high or substantial transmission. Officials said that decision was dictated by research indicating the delta variant is far more contagious than the original strain of the virus, and the vaccinated could spread it.

"I think people need to understand that we're not crying wolf here. This is serious," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky told CNN Thursday. "It's one of the most transmissible viruses we know about."

Among the unvaccinated, CDC research shows the delta variant spreads as easily as chickenpox, with each infected person possibly transmitting it to five to nine others. The latest data also suggest some vaccinated people carry as much of the virus in their nose and throat as unvaccinated people if they are infected with the delta variant.

“I think we knew this was a possibility... but it sounds like the delta strain may be more contagious and viral loads may be higher,” said Dr. Susan Kline, an infectious disease physician at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

Health officials have been struggling with a steady rise in infections in recent weeks as the delta strain spreads rapidly, accounting for more than 80% of new cases in the United States. Areas with low vaccination rates have seen the steepest increases in cases, and the Biden administration has adopted new strategies to encourage those who are still hesitant to get the shots as more companies announce vaccine requirements.

"This is an American tragedy," President Joe Biden said at the White House Thursday. "People are dying -- and will die -- who don't have to die. If you're out there unvaccinated, you don't have to die."

New vaccinations are beginning to accelerate, but a return to widespread mask use could provide broader protection until more of the population is immunized. CDC forecasts updated Thursday predicted up to 1.2 million new COVID-19 cases could be reported in the next four weeks nationwide, resulting in nearly 7,000 more deaths.

A study published in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Friday detailed an outbreak of COVID-19 in Provincetown, Mass., after the July 4 weekend in which nearly 900 infections have been identified and 75% of them were among the fully vaccinated. The Provincetown cluster has not resulted in any deaths or a significant increase in hospitalizations—a sign of the effectiveness of the vaccines in preventing severe symptoms—but it was reportedly a major factor in the agency's decision to update masking guidance.

“Findings from this investigation suggest that even jurisdictions without substantial or high COVID-19 transmission might consider expanding prevention strategies, including masking in indoor public settings regardless of vaccination status, given the potential risk of infection during attendance at large public gatherings that include travelers from many areas with differing levels of transmission,” the MMWR report stated.

CDC officials do not yet have clinical data on exactly how contagious vaccinated people who experience breakthrough infections with the delta variant are, and the study involved a very small sample in unique circumstances. Still, the fact that the vaccinated can carry a similar viral load to the unvaccinated led them to assume transmission is likely to occur.

“Data from this report are insufficient to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines against SARS-CoV-2, including the delta variant, during this outbreak,” the MMWR report authors cautioned.

An internal CDC presentation obtained by The Washington Post Thursday cited the Massachusetts cluster and additional studies from several countries as evidence the delta variant

is more transmissible and can cause more severe disease than other strains. In Scotland, Singapore, and Canada, patients infected with the delta variant have been more likely to end up hospitalized or die from their symptoms.

“Acknowledge the war has changed,” one slide stated, advising the agency to shift its communication strategy to improve the public’s understanding of breakthrough infections.

While the new research seems to upend some expectations about COVID-19, it also affirms that the existing vaccines are highly effective against the delta variant. The CDC estimates there are 35,000 symptomatic breakthrough infections per week among the 163 million fully vaccinated Americans, and only a small fraction of those cases have resulted in hospitalization or death.

“If you're vaccinated, you're not likely to die from delta," Dr. Thomas Frieden, former director of the CDC, told The National Desk Friday. "If you're not vaccinated, delta could be coming for you. And that's just the reality.”

According to Dr. Leslie Kantor, a professor of urban-global public health at the Rutgers School of Public Health, there is no question vaccines continue to prevent the worst outcomes in those who have been inoculated. However, she compared virus mitigation to slices of swiss cheese, where every precaution has some holes in it and the goal is to layer safeguards on top of each other to minimize the gaps in protection.

“Your vaccine is one slice and it’s a really important slice, but we’re finding even that has some small holes in it, so what you want to do is layer on that masks, layer on being outside, layer on ventilation,” she said.

The current controversy is exactly what some feared when the CDC relaxed masking recommendations for the vaccinated two months ago. Many epidemiologists felt that decision was premature and would lead the public to let its guard down before enough people were immunized to prevent another resurgence.

“Frankly, I was concerned back in May when the CDC announced they were going to take away their recommendation that vaccinated people wear masks in crowded indoor spaces...,” Kline said. “Once you remove the masking guidance, unvaccinated people are going to without a mask, exposing greater numbers of people and making themselves more vulnerable.”

As of Friday, just under half the U.S. population was fully vaccinated, and tens of millions of Americans are either too young to get the shots or suffer from medical conditions that make the vaccines less effective. The virus spreading among the vaccinated could pose public health risks, even if those who are vaccinated are unlikely to face severe symptoms themselves.

“I think people need to really appreciate this is a novel virus and it’s a virus that’s mutating,” Kantor said. “The fact that the information is changing does not mean people were lying to you. It means we’re learning.”

The CDC presentation suggested that “universal masking” would now be necessary to slow the spread of the virus. It also called for the agency to “reconsider” other mitigation strategies that had been relaxed, although no other changes to public guidance have been made.

Additional research published Friday in Nature Scientific Reports cautioned that vaccination alone might not stop the spread of the virus, and continued circulation in a partially vaccinated community could lead more vaccine-resistant strains to develop. The authors concluded added interventions like masks and social distancing can minimize the danger until nearly everyone is inoculated.

"When most people are vaccinated, the vaccine-resistant strain has an advantage over the original strain," co-author Simon Rella told reporters.

The release of the updated CDC mask guidance without the underlying data led critics to question the reasoning behind the change, and even some public health experts expressed skepticism. The research released Friday might not alleviate all those complaints, as the response to the latest surge of infections becomes increasingly polarized.

“The whole thing, I think, was poorly handled,” Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a health policy expert at the Cato Institute, said Thursday.

Mask wars return

Many Republican governors and members of Congress have flatly rejected the new guidance, claiming it is not based in science or common sense and warning it could discourage the unvaccinated from lining up for shots. A group of House Republicans held a protest at the Capitol Thursday against new masking requirements imposed on the chamber at the behest of the Capitol physician.

Republican senators introduced legislation Thursday that would direct the Government Accountability Office to investigate the CDC’s decision-making and messaging on masks, alleging the agency offered no “clear, verifiable justification” for the shift. The review would also look at the extent to which outside entities like teachers’ unions might have influenced recommendations.

"These guidelines, like most of the Biden administration's actions these days, make little sense and seem without scientific direction," said Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. “Americans have spent the last year and a half making tremendous sacrifices to halt the virus's spread, but they are confused

and have lost trust in our institutions. The mixed messaging could also degrade trust in the efficacy of vaccines.”

Many Democrat-run cities have already announced new mask mandates, but some Republican governors and state legislatures have prohibited them. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott issued an executive order Thursday preventing any county, city, or public health authority from requiring face-coverings anywhere in the state, except in hospitals and jails.

“Texans have mastered the safe practices that help to prevent and avoid the spread of COVID-19,” said Abbott, whose state has seen a dramatic increase in infections. “They have the individual right and responsibility to decide for themselves and their children whether they will wear masks, open their businesses, and engage in leisure activities.”

Experts say the delayed release of the supporting data was unfortunate, but it was perhaps unavoidable given the processes and clearances involved with publishing government research. Full transparency is best when trying to convince the public to comply with inconvenient restrictions.

“As a public health professional, I am always going to be interested in getting data and information out to people as quickly as possible,” Kantor said. “I think we can reduce some resistance to new guidelines going back in place when we give people the whole story.”

The United Kingdom’s delta-driven wave of COVID-19 infections has begun to slow despite an easing of social distancing restrictions. It is not yet certain why that happened or if the reduction will be sustained, but it could be a promising sign for U.S. trends if it continues.

In the meantime, masks could be back for the foreseeable future in parts of the country that heed CDC guidance. The virus is unlikely to go away anytime soon and entrenched anti-vaccine sentiments have proven difficult to overcome, so officials might be reluctant to revise their recommendations again until vaccination rates or infection rates greatly improve.

“I really think we’ll have to see how the case rates change over the coming months, and I still think the best thing people could do really to protect themselves is to get vaccinated,” Kline said.