

Can I gather with friends and family after getting the COVID-19 vaccine? Can I travel? Here are what health experts say.

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The U.S. is inching closer to herd immunity almost two months into the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, with more than one million Americans getting vaccinated per day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But with a large portion of the population still waiting to get vaccinated and questions around asymptomatic spread, immunized Americans wonder: Is it safe to leave the house and live a pre-pandemic lifestyle?

Not just yet, experts say.

Getting the vaccine is not a "free pass" to "put aside all the public health measures" officials have been reiterating since the beginning of the pandemic, Dr. Anthony Fauci said in a CNN town hall in January.

"We don't want people to think that just because they're vaccinated that other public health

recommendations just don't apply," said the nation's leading infectious disease expert.

But, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Each vaccination gets the U.S. closer to herd immunity and closer to easing restrictions and returning to normal, health experts say. Until then, social gatherings and travel without protective measures could jeopardize how quickly that may happen.

What the data says about the COVID vaccine, social gatherings and travel

Data shows small gatherings drive transmission as people tend to relax [safety precautions](#)—such as masking and social distancing—around close friends and family, said Dr. Wafaa El-Sadr, professor of epidemiology and medicine at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

Even when a person is vaccinated, it takes up to two weeks to reach maximum immunity and no shot offers total protection.

Recent data also shows the COVID-19 vaccines may be less effective against new coronavirus variants, specifically one that originated in South Africa. As of Wednesday, the U.S. reported 932 cases of the U.K. variant and nine cases of the South African variant, according to CDC data. The agency said the U.K. variant, called B.1.1.7, could become the dominant strain by March.

Colleges around the U.S. have canceled [spring break](#) to discourage students from traveling after celebrations around the same time last year led to a summer surge of coronavirus infections.

Traveling is one of the fastest ways to spread the coronavirus, experts say, and unfortunately, we still don't know if the COVID-19 vaccine protects

against transmission.

While studies show the vaccines are effective against symptomatic disease, researchers are still learning its impact on asymptomatic infection. For this reason, health officials warn against non-essential travel even after getting vaccinated.

"You can conceivably get infected, get no symptoms and still have virus in your nasal pharynx," Fauci said during the town hall. It's possible that while carrying that virus, someone can transmit it to other travelers, family or friends.

"We're in a race between the vaccines and a race with the virus, and it's a moment in time where there's a lot of unknowns," El-Sadr said.

How can I attend social gatherings safely after getting vaccinated?

While some states have already begun to lift COVID-19 restrictions on restaurants, weddings and even indoor entertainment, health experts say it's too early to attend social gatherings without protection.

After a year of pandemic restrictions, Americans are eager to get out of the house, El-Sadr said. But she urges Americans to continue masking and social distancing.

"Whatever you were doing the day before you got vaccinated, you continue to do the day after you get vaccinated," El-Sadr said.

If people have to get together, they should minimize risk by being outside, wearing a mask and social distancing, said Dr. Sarita Shah, associate professor of at the department of global health, epidemiology and infectious diseases at Emory University.

"We can get together in these small groups using these safety steps that we all know work," she said.

While getting the COVID-19 vaccine doesn't mean a sudden return to pre-pandemic ways, it could mean less anxiety and more individual freedoms.

Experts disagree on exactly how much freedom, but Dr. Vinay Prasad, an associate professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California San Francisco, argues there's little risk in dining with a fellow vaccinated friend indoors or hugging fully immunized grandparents.

Nothing in this world comes with 0% risk, he adds, but one can drastically diminish risk by getting vaccinated. After that, it's up to the individual to assess their own risk comfortability.

"No one is chasing a zero-risk life. In fact, that is a mirage," Prasad said in an op-ed on Medpage Today. "Instead, we all want reasonable safety."

How can I travel safely?

Spring travel may be possible if it's done safely and travelers are mindful of where they're going and who they're seeing. People should avoid traveling to an area where infections are on the rise and visiting loved ones who are vulnerable to severe disease and not vaccinated.

President Joe Biden signed an executive order in his first days in office mandating masks in flights, trains and buses. The Transportation Security Administration announced last week that it will recommend fines ranging from \$250 to \$1,500 for people who do not abide by the new transportation mask order.

The CDC issued guidelines Wednesday recommending wearing a surgical mask underneath a cloth mask or knotting the surgical masks to prevent air seeping through the sides.

Shah doesn't expect [coronavirus](#) cases to increase dramatically like it did after the holidays as more Americans will be vaccinated and warmer weather will hopefully push people to host gatherings outside.

"On Memorial Day, we're going to have a different scenario," she said. "The first and best thing is that it's warmer and people will be outside. That reduces the risk a lot."

When will things return to normal?

The Biden administration is on track to administer 100 million vaccine doses in 100 days. But even after accomplishing this goal, the U.S. will still be far from achieving herd immunity, said CDC director Rochelle Walensky.

"It's going to take a while for us to feel like we're back to a sense of normalcy," she said during the CNN town hall. "After we vaccinate 100 million Americans, we're going to have 200 million more to vaccinate."

The U.S. vaccination timeline is in constant fluctuation as vaccine distribution strategies change and the federal government works to secure more doses, experts say. As of now, Americans can expect a degree of normalcy in the late summer or early fall.

But health experts stress that this timeline could change for better or worse and implore Americans to be flexible and patient.

"At this stage we have so many questions still and we have such low coverage with these vaccines," El-Sadr said. "I urge everyone to continue to be as cautious as they have been for their own protection as well as the protection of their loved ones."

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