

Why you still can't visit unmasked, even if you're fully vaccinated

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The day has finally come—two weeks have passed since you received your second dose of the vaccine, making you officially fully vaccinated. You're ready to celebrate. And you're dreaming of having your other vaccinated friends over to join. But is it a good idea?

It's a question on many people's minds, and one recently posed to Curious Philly—our platform where readers ask us questions and reporters hunt down the answers. One reader asked:

"If all members of a friend group have been fully vaccinated, is it safe to get together indoors without any precautions?"

While the current vaccines are highly effective at preventing COVID-19 infections, the answer is complicated. Here's what to consider before gathering with friends post-vaccination.

You can worry less about COVID-19 once vaccinated. But we still don't know enough about new variants.

"The best thing you can do to protect yourself and the country is to get vaccinated," says Darren Mareiniss, an emergency medicine doctor at Einstein Medical Center and an assistant professor of emergency medicine at Thomas Jefferson University. "But until we have better data, we need to proceed cautiously."

New, more infectious variants are starting to spread, and while [clinical studies](#) found the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines to be roughly 95% effective, we don't have a full understanding on how variants could affect their response. Because of this unknown, Mareiniss doesn't advise gathering indoors with people outside your household, even if everyone is vaccinated.

"That 95% is based on the prior strain or strains of COVID circulating while those studies were being carried out," says Mareiniss. "The vaccines appear effective against the variants, but we just don't know to what extent and we need more data."

There are multiple variants of COVID-19 circulating globally, an expected result of the virus mutating as it's passed from person to person. The three most concerning are the U.K., South Africa, and Brazil variants, all of which appear to be more infectious than other circulating strains.

Recent lab-based studies suggest that the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines are highly effective against the UK variant. However, the vaccines' efficacy against the South African variant is less clear. Published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the findings showed that the variant may reduce protective antibodies. But further research is needed to determine what effect this reduction has on the vaccine's overall protection against the variant. "I think we'll know more in the next six months," says Mareiniss. Until then, patience remains our friend.

Even if you do get infected after getting vaccinated, it's unlikely that you'll get really sick.

Experts agree, however, that getting vaccinated will likely prevent severe illness, even if you become infected from a variant. It's one reason why experts say you should schedule a vaccine appointment as soon as it's available to you.

"One-hundred-percent of people who've been vaccinated have not died from COVID, and to me, that's the most important number and outcome," says Ayiti-Carmel Maharaj-Best, an assistant professor of Clinical Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Pennsylvania. "The vaccine [efficacy] percentages might change in response to new variants, but based on what we're seeing from the data, the severity of illness should still decrease."

If you're vaccinated and exposed to COVID-19, you don't need to quarantine, as long as you meet these 3 criteria: Returning to 'normal' too quickly creates risk of throwing away the progress we've made as a country.

Maharaj-Best thinks it's still a little too early to hang out with other people without masks. While vaccination will help protect you and prevent the worst, there are other factors to consider. For starters, let's say you unfortunately get infected. Even if your symptoms are mild, this doesn't prevent you from passing the virus to others, including those who aren't vaccinated and may be more vulnerable. There's also the question of whether or not vaccinated people can carry the virus asymptotically—meaning symptoms never appear—and spread it to others. It's another unknown that's currently being researched.

With a deadly pandemic, there's little room for error. Since the vaccine is still not widely available, and the virus continues to circulate nationwide, experts warn that we must not yet let down our guard. "The public has made such a huge sacrifice to get to this point and to make the progress we're finally seeing. I wouldn't want us as a country, as a world, to throw that away too soon," says Maharaj-Best. "People can make their own decisions about taking a calculated risk, but the safest thing is to give it

some more time so we can really be sure of the response to the variants and how this is going to go."

Getting vaccinated can help prevent new, potentially worse variants.

You might be wondering, "What's the point of getting vaccinated if it won't make much difference to my social life?" "Anyone can understand that frustration," says Mareiniss. "But it's the best thing you could do to prevent getting severely ill or dying. And eventually, with the proper information, we will be able to return to normality."

There's another major reason to get vaccinated as soon as possible, too. Vaccination plays a role in stopping new mutations from emerging, ones that could potentially create even larger challenges.

"Theoretically, each time the virus jumps from person to person, there's an opportunity for it to replicate in a slightly different way," says Maharaj-Best. "So the faster that we can get people vaccinated, and the more people, the better our chances of being able to prevent any new mutations from taking hold."

If you are going to have mask-less hang outs with other vaccinated people, keep it small.

Making decisions about your social life is also part of the risk-benefit analysis we've been doing throughout the pandemic. Experts across the board recognize the serious mental health toll that isolation and lack of physical contact have taken. And in some cases, you may decide that if you're fully vaccinated, and your mom is too, and you both understand the risks, it's worth going in for a hug.

"The problem is, the vaccine has arrived and we're telling people they can't interact the same way they used to, and that's not an easy thing for anyone to deal with," says Craig Shapiro, pediatric infectious diseases specialist, Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children. "You still have to be mindful of these interactions, but you have to take each individual interaction from a risk-benefit perspective."

Shapiro adds, "If you are going to interact without distancing and masks, the safest situation to do that in is with a very small group of vaccinated individuals."

It's simple math. The fewer people, the less chance of being exposed to someone who's infected.

"You are definitely safer seeing your family vaccinated than unvaccinated. There's no question about that," says Maharaj-Best. "But we have to think about it on a population level. Could any of these behaviors lead to a longer pandemic?"

Double-masking can increase your protection. But not all masks should be layered. So when can we go back to normal?

Safe, mask-free hangouts are on the horizon. Once approximately 70- to 80-percent of the population has gained protection against COVID-19, either through vaccination or infection, then we can roll back more protective measures, experts say.

"That's the whole concept of herd immunity, and I do believe that we'll get there, but the big factor that's missing from that equation is time," says Maharaj-Best. "The more we maintain these measures now, the sooner we'll get to that point."

The exact timeline depends on a couple key factors: How quickly we can get the population vaccinated and when more data on the vaccine in a real world setting becomes available.

"Like everything else with this pandemic, things are going to change every day with more people being vaccinated and the number of cases in the community changing," says Shapiro. "Vaccination is important on an individual level, but the greatest impact that we're going to have is on a [population level](#)."

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