

Fully vaccinated people can gather without masks, CDC says

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Medical Assistant Keona Shepard holds up the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine as she prepares to administer it at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center during the mass coronavirus vaccination in New Orleans, in this Thursday, March 4, 2021, file photo. (Chris Granger/The Advocate via AP, File)

Fully vaccinated Americans can gather with other vaccinated people indoors without wearing a mask or social distancing, according to long-awaited guidance from federal health officials.

The recommendations also say that vaccinated people can come together in the same way—in a single household—with people considered at low-risk for severe disease, such as in the case of vaccinated grandparents visiting healthy children and grandchildren.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the guidance Monday.

The guidance is designed to address a growing demand, as more adults have been getting vaccinated and wondering if it gives them greater freedom to visit family members, travel, or do other

things like they did before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world last year.

"With more and more people vaccinated each day, we are starting to turn a corner," said CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky.

During a press briefing Monday, she called the guidance a "first step" toward restoring normalcy in how people come together. She said more activities would be ok'd for vaccinated individuals once caseloads and deaths decline, more Americans are vaccinated, and as more science emerges on the ability of those who have been vaccinated to get and spread the virus.

The CDC is continuing to recommend that fully vaccinated people still wear [well-fitted masks](#), avoid large gatherings, and physically distance themselves from others when out in public. The CDC also advised vaccinated people to get tested if they develop symptoms that could be related to COVID-19.

The CDC guidance did not speak to people who may have gained some level of immunity from being infected, and recovering from, the coronavirus.

Officials say a person is considered fully vaccinated two weeks after receiving the last required dose of vaccine. About 31 million Americans—or only about 9% of the U.S. population—have been fully vaccinated with a federally authorized COVID-19 vaccine so far, according to the CDC.

Authorized vaccine doses first became available in December, and they were products that required two doses spaced weeks apart. But since January, a small but growing number of Americans have been fully vaccinated, and have been asking questions like: Do I still have to wear a mask? Can I go to a bar now? Can I finally see my grandchildren?



In this March 2, 2021, file photo, Vanessa Guerra, at right, a special education teacher at Grant Elementary School in Hollywood, receives a shot of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine from nurse Kelly Mendoza at a site for employees of the Los Angeles school district in the parking lot of SOFI Stadium in Inglewood, Calif. Cities and states are rapidly expanding access to vaccines as the nation races to head off a resurgence in coronavirus infections and reopen schools and businesses battered by the pandemic. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

The guidance was "welcome news to a nation that is understandably tired of the pandemic and longs to safely resume normal activities," said Dr. Richard Besser, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a former acting director of the CDC.

"I hope that this new guidance provides the momentum for everyone to get vaccinated when they can and gives states the patience to follow the public health roadmap needed to reopen their economies and communities safely," said Besser, in a statement.

But some said the guidance is too cautious.

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of the University of Nebraska College of Public Health, said the guidance is reasonable in many respects—with the exception of travel.

The CDC did not change its recommendations on travel, which discourages unnecessary travel and

calls for getting tested within a few days of the trip. That could seem confusing to vaccinated people hoping to visit family across the country or abroad.

"They need to relax travel for those vaccinated" and to immediately publish electronic standards for documents that show whether a person is fully vaccinated, said Khan, who formerly was a leading CDC disease detective.

The new guidance also says nothing about going to restaurants or other places, even though governors are lifting restrictions on businesses, said Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University who formerly was Baltimore's health commissioner.

Wen has said the CDC should have had some kind of post-vaccination guidance ready in January, when some people first began to finish their second doses. And she called the guidance that came out Monday "far too cautious."

"The CDC is missing a major opportunity to tie vaccination status with reopening guidance. By coming out with such limited guidance, they are missing the window to influence state and national policy," Wen said, in an email.

But some people who are fully vaccinated were pleased by Monday's news.



Granby kindergarten school teacher Christina Kibby receives the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine by pharmacist Madeline Acquilano, left, at Hartford Hospital

in Hartford, Conn., Wednesday, March 3, 2021. The first shipments of the vaccine arrived at the hospital this morning. Cities and states are rapidly expanding access to vaccines as the nation races to head off a resurgence in coronavirus infections and reopen schools and businesses battered by the pandemic. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

Ruth Michienzi was among those receiving her second and final vaccine dose at a pharmacy inside a Stop and Shop supermarket in Woburn, Massachusetts on Monday morning.

The 91-year-old resident of nearby Burlington said she's fine with having to still wear a facemask in public and follow other safety guidelines even after being fully vaccinated.

But Michienzi also said she's excited to finally be able to take off her mask in front of her three great grandchildren. She's seen them in person since receiving her first shot about a month ago, but has kept her mask on.

"I hope they remember me," she said.

"I've been doing all of that for a year, and I don't want that year to be wasted," Michienzi said of the safety regulations. "I think it's smart to wait."

A pair of customers, who weren't in line to receive shots, though, openly groused about the continued restrictions and voiced fears that stricter mandates on travel and socializing would follow, even as more are vaccinated.

Grace McShane, 61, of Melrose, also received her second dose Monday at the same supermarket.

She says she qualified for the vaccine because she's high risk, including suffering a heart attack last year. The in-home caregiver said she too was fine with the continued restrictions even after being vaccinated.

"Even if you're vaccinated, it's better to be safe than sorry. This is the new normal. This is part of life and you just have to adapt to it," McShane said.

She said she's looking forward to hugging her three grandchildren without having to wear a mask. Her grown children have also been vaccinated as essential workers, she said.

"Just cuddle and give them hugs," McShane said. "That's all I want to do."

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