

## COVID Update May 21, 2021

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced on Thursday May 13 that fully vaccinated people can go without masks in most circumstances.

The new guidance was based on analysis of a new study that found that real-life use of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines provided 94% protection for over 4,000 front-line health care workers immunized at the beginning of the vaccine rollout who had weekly COVID testing following vaccination. A single dose provided 82% protection, the CDC-led team reported in the agency's weekly report, the MMWR.

The new study also showed that fully vaccinated people are unlikely to develop asymptomatic infection and unknowingly shed virus, because even if infected, they have a very low viral load. This corroborates the findings of three major studies that have shown that fully vaccinated people are not likely to test positive for coronavirus, which indicates they are not carrying it in their bodies, whether they have symptoms or not.

A similar study from Israel also found vaccinated people who got infected had a lower viral load -- fourfold lower than unvaccinated people.

The new CDC guidance states that vaccinated individuals can in general safely remove their masks in large and small groups, indoors and out. However, it was recommended that masks continue to be worn on public transportation (including trains, buses, airplanes), and in homeless shelters and correctional facilities. The new guidance does not apply to health care settings.

Concern was immediately raised regarding increased risk to the unvaccinated, including children under 12 and individuals who are immunocompromised in whom the vaccine may not be effective; the fact that the new guidance relies on unvaccinated individuals continuing to mask and distance, which may not occur; and the known presence in the U.S. of the 'India variant' B.1.617, which is more contagious and may have less susceptibility to the current vaccines.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, CDC Director, in testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday, stated that the new CDC guidelines were meant to indicate that vaccinated individuals could feel safe removing their masks in most circumstances, but that decisions to remove mask mandates needed to be made at the local level because the country is not homogeneous in terms of vaccination rates, disease rates, or percent of population at risk.

Numerous epidemiologists, infectious disease physicians and other "experts" have expressed concern that the new guidance was too abrupt and possibly politically motivated. The recent resignations of two high level, long time CDC directors (Anne Schuchat, principal deputy director; and Nancy Messonnier, COVID response coordinator) reinforced that concern for many. Dr. Walensky denied political motivation in her appearances on a number of Sunday morning news shows.

SC DHEC data show that the state remains mostly 'moderate' in case rates, but in Greenville County, it has fallen to 89.4 per 100,000 population over 2 weeks, the lowest it has been in many months.

On Wednesday May 18, the percent positive for the past two weeks in SC was 4.1 %.

While COVID-19 illness is relatively rare in children, the CDC reported rates had doubled since March in the 5-17 age group.

On a positive note, SC has administered 9,000 doses of COVID vaccine to 12-15 year olds in the first week they were eligible to receive it.

The U.S. has more than 32.9 million confirmed coronavirus cases and 587,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University data. More than 346.6 million vaccine doses have been distributed in the U.S. and 275.5 million have been administered, according to the CDC. Nearly 124.4 million Americans have been fully vaccinated, or 37.5% of the population.

It does appear that the latest and worst surge in cases across the nation is over. The country's pace of new cases fell this past weekend below the mid-September low, before the eight-month winter surge that was responsible for 80% of total U.S. infections and two-thirds of U.S. deaths.

Daily infections now total less than half what they were a month ago and a small fraction of January's raging numbers. The U.S. continues to report about 600 deaths a day, roughly one-fifth the pace seen in January.

On Monday, Great Britain eliminated the strict lockdown that has been in place for months, thanks to an efficient vaccination program. All restaurants and bars in England can reopen with some precautions in place, as well as other public venues such as hotels, theaters and museums.