

Questions and Answers for Health Officers Statement Regarding Masking in Public Indoor Spaces

*Snohomish Health District
July 26, 2021*

Statement from Health Officers:

The health officers of King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap, Clallam, Jefferson, San Juan, and Grays Harbor counties have joined together to pass on their best public health advice to protect you, your family, and our communities. We recommend all residents wear facial coverings when in indoor public settings where the vaccination status of those around you is unknown. This step will help reduce the risk of COVID-19 to the public, including customers and workers, help stem the increase in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations in many parts of the state and decrease the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant.

Vaccinations are our best defense against COVID-19 and are safe, effective, and readily available for everyone age 12 and over. Please get yours immediately if you are not already vaccinated.

Additional notes:

- Science has proven that two of the best ways to stop the transmission of COVID-19 are vaccines and masks.
- Given the rising numbers, and rapid increase of the delta variant in Washington, public health's best advice to protect yourself and your communities is to get vaccinated and for everyone to wear a mask when in indoor public settings.

Questions and Answers:

Where does this recommendation apply?

Anyone over the age of 2 is encouraged to mask up if they are entering an indoor space that is open to the public. This includes retail, grocery stores, government buildings, or other businesses or places where members of the public can enter freely without vetting of vaccination status and enforcement of masking by unvaccinated people. If you are in an indoor space where you cannot be certain those around you are fully vaccinated, we encourage you to mask up. It does add another layer of protection to what vaccination has already given you. If you're not vaccinated, it prevents transmission to others.

What does this mean for businesses?

This is not a new or separate mandate for businesses, which must still comply with statewide mask requirements and should be requiring masks for unvaccinated individuals in public indoor spaces. However, we are encouraging businesses to ask all individuals to mask up when entering in order to help protect workers and customers, particularly if they are unable to verify vaccination status of everyone who enters their establishment. And if everyone does it, there's no shaming about who is or isn't vaccinated.

Why are local health officers urging masking for all in these settings when DOH/Governor's Office has not done so?

Local public health officials are responsible for providing their best advice and guidance for their communities on how COVID is transmitted and the means for its prevention. In light of the increasing case counts, hospitalizations, and transmission of the delta variant, the health officers felt it was important to share this recommendation with their communities for reducing transmission of COVID-19.

How will this be enforced?

This is not a mandate. This is a recommendation from the health officers to keep the community as safe as possible. Resources are available for businesses, such as signage to remind customers and workers to put on their masks before entering, but this recommendation does not issue a requirement that is stricter than anything from the state, and there is no enforcement action related to this recommendation.

If the vaccines are so effective, why do vaccinated people need to mask up?

The vaccines are highly effective, and this recommendation does not challenge that fact. No vaccine is 100 percent effective at preventing illness. Those who are fully vaccinated are less likely to become ill with COVID, and much less likely to become hospitalized or to die if they do become ill. Still, vaccinated people can get COVID – these are called breakthrough cases, and we know they are happening here in Washington. So even though you are at least 10 times less likely to get COVID or have a severe illness if you are fully vaccinated, you still can get sick and potentially spread it to others. Well-fitting, multi-layer cloth face masks reduce spread of infectious droplets from a case by up to 70-80 percent. These same masks also reduced the risk of inhaling infectious droplets from others by up to 50 percent. In short, mask wearing protects you and protects others. As case rates rise, and as we continue to learn more about the highly transmissible delta variant, masking is an extra layer of protection that the health officers are encouraging for everyone when indoors in public. Vaccination, mask wearing, good ventilation, and hand hygiene: we need them all to keep bad health and economic consequences of this delta strain at bay.

Isn't this confusing? Do people listen to the CDC, DOH, or their local health department?

This is not a mandate that contradicts requirements from CDC or DOH. It is advice to help people stay safe and healthy. There is agreement among CDC, DOH and local public health officials that COVID vaccines and masking have been effective at reducing transmission. While the CDC and DOH are not requiring masks in all indoor public settings for fully vaccinated individuals, it's been clear that even vaccinated people may still choose to mask up, and that is what we are encouraging them to do. At the same time, this ensures easy verification that all unvaccinated people are masked in those settings, as well.