

California exempts San Francisco from COVID indoor mask rule

December 15 2021



Signs with social distancing guidelines and face mask requirements are posted at an outdoor mall amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Los Angeles, on June 11, 2021. California is bringing back a statewide indoor mask mandate. California Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration announced the new mandate will start Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021, and last until Jan. 15. The order comes as the per capita rate of new coronavirus cases in California has jumped 47% in the past two weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File

California is exempting San Francisco from a rule that takes effect Wednesday requiring all people to wear masks indoors in a bid to contain a troubling rise in new coronavirus cases.

San Francisco will continue to allow fully vaccinated people to remove their masks in gyms and workplaces while its overall masking mandate remains in effect, the city Department of Public Health announced.

"It's a recognition of all of the thought and care that San Francisco residents have been putting into staying as safe as possible," said Dr. Susan Philip, San Francisco's health officer.

About 86% of eligible San Francisco residents have received at least one vaccine dose, according to the public health department.

San Francisco businesses were relieved that the city can continue permitting fully vaccinated people to go maskless in some indoor locations.

"To have any disruption at all in the progress we've made over the last year and a half in getting customers back would have been devastating," Dave Karraker, co-owner of MX3 Fitness and spokesman for the San Francisco Independent Fitness Studio Coalition, told the San Francisco Chronicle.

Several other San Francisco Bay Area counties also had relaxed masking rules for vaccinated people but it wasn't immediately clear whether the state would exempt them, too.

California lifted its statewide mask mandate on June 15 for people who were vaccinated, a date that Gov. Gavin Newsom heralded as the state's

grand reopening.

But health officials are worried about the spread of the new omicron COVID-19 variant, which health officials believe can spread more easily than the original and delta strains. The virus is particularly hitting the unvaccinated.



California Gov. Gavin Newsom holds a face mask while speaking at a news conference in Oakland, Calif., on July 26, 2021. California is bringing back a statewide indoor mask mandate. Newsom's administration announced the new mandate will start Wednesday, Dec. 15 and last until Jan. 15, 2022. The order comes as the per capita rate of new coronavirus cases in California has jumped 47% in the past two weeks. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

The new mandate, which will remain in force until at least Jan. 15, also is aimed at reducing the COVID-19 risk when friends and families travel or gather indoors for the holidays.

However, officials haven't specified how it will be enforced and have acknowledged that much will depend on voluntary public compliance.

After California lifted its statewide indoor mask mandate this summer, county governments covering about half of the state's population imposed their own mandates as case rates surged with new variants.

The order comes as the statewide seven-day average rate of new coronavirus cases has jumped 47% since Thanksgiving and hospitalizations have risen by 14%, according to the state Department of Public Health.

That's still far below a surge last winter—before vaccines were available—when the state averaged more than 100 cases per 100,000 people and nearly 20,000 people died during an eight-week period.

What's worrying now is that even though more than 70% of eligible Californians are fully vaccinated, some areas of the state still have low vaccination rates that put communities of greater risk for the coronavirus, according to the health department.

"Given the current hospital census, which is at or over capacity, even a moderate surge in cases and hospitalizations could materially impact California's health care delivery system within certain regions of the state," the department said.

California joins other states with similar indoor mask mandates, including Washington, Oregon, Illinois, New Mexico, Nevada, Hawaii, and New York.

California also is tightening existing testing requirements by ordering unvaccinated people attending indoor events of 1,000 people or more to have a negative test within one or two days, depending on the type of test. The state also is recommending travelers who visit or return to California to get tested within five days of their arrival.

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