

We might need to keep wearing masks into 2022 to defeat COVID-19

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Despite a sharp decline in coronavirus cases and continued success with COVID-19 vaccines, it's looking likely we will still be wearing masks for some time to come.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's coronavirus czar, said it's possible masks could be needed until 2022.

"I want it to keep going down to a baseline that's so low there is virtually no threat," Fauci said on CNN's "State of the Union" program. "If you combine getting most of the people in the country vaccinated with getting the level of virus in the community very, very low, then I believe you're going to be able to say, you know, for the most part, we don't necessarily have to wear masks."

Fauci's comments underscore what experts have been saying for weeks: that even as more people get vaccinated, masks are still going to be essential.

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cautioned against viewing the downward case trends as a reason to let up on masking and other safety precautions.

In an interview with the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Walensky said she hoped for the best, but also warned of a [worst-case scenario](#)—that people will stop wearing masks and physically distancing too early and that many will prematurely declare they've had enough of the pandemic and won't get vaccinated.

"What worries me a little bit is when you hit September, and then it gets colder again, and there may be a variant that emerges," and people stop wearing masks and physically distancing, Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, told The Times last week.

Basic steps like wearing masks in public and keeping a [physical distance](#) from those outside your household will still provide an additional layer of safety, experts say, and help further drive down coronavirus transmission—eventually allowing more parts of the economy to reopen.

The CDC says that continued adherence to [public health measures](#) like wearing face coverings, observing physical distancing, regular handwashing and avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated areas is still recommended even for someone who has received both required vaccine doses.

"It's important for everyone to continue using all the tools available to help stop this pandemic as we learn more about how COVID-19 vaccines work in real-world conditions," CDC guidance states, particularly because it's not yet definitively known "whether getting a COVID-19 vaccine will prevent you from spreading the virus that causes COVID-19 to other people, even if you don't get sick yourself."

Universal mask wearing, in particular, is seen as critical in keeping the spread of the [coronavirus](#) on a downward trend. A recent CDC report found that states that have imposed mask orders have seen declines in the growth of COVID-19-associated hospitalizations.

The new variants have had some [health officials](#) urging more precautions with masks.

One way to improve masking is to first put on a paper mask—such as a blue surgical mask—and then put on a tight-fitting cloth mask over that, Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said. The second mask covers the big gaps that can occur with a paper mask, allowing air to leak around the sides. Another option is to use a cloth mask that has multiple layers of fabric, according to the CDC.

Here are some other tips:

Using a nose wire—a metal strip at the top of a mask that can be molded to fit the bridge of your nose—can help prevent air from leaking out the top.

Try to make sure air doesn't flow from the area near your eyes or from the mask's sides. "If the mask has a good fit, you will feel warm air come through the front of the mask and may be able to see the mask material move in and out with each breath," the CDC says.

Knotting the ear loops at the mask's edge, and folding and tucking excess mask material under the edges, can help improve the fit. Check out this video instruction.

Use only one KN95 mask at a time. CDC officials say KN95s as well as traditional N95s are intended to be used on their own. Adding extra masks underneath or on top of them "could not only affect how well they fit the face and decrease their effectiveness, but could increase the effort needed to breathe through them," the CDC said in an email to The Times. The CDC suggests not using N95 [masks](#), saying they "should be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders to prevent supply shortages."

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