

Toronto hospitals relax mask mandates amid lower levels of COVID-19 transmission



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A number of Toronto hospitals have relaxed mandatory masking policies that have been in place throughout much of the COVID-19 pandemic.

University Health Network, Unity Health, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, Sinai Health and the Hospital for Sick Children all recently introduced updated policies, which will allow visitors and staff to drop their masks in most public areas while keeping the requirement in place in patient rooms and in waiting areas where patients are present.

The policies mostly went into place on June 27 and June 28, though the updated guidance at the University Health Network only [took effect today](#).

In a statement provided to CP24.com, a spokesperson for the Hospital for Sick Children said that it “moved in lockstep with all Toronto Region hospitals” in adjusting its masking protocols amid “low community transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses.”

A spokesperson for Sinai Health, meanwhile, said that it has adjusted its policy to “focus on patient care activities and patient contact” and better reflect “the current phase of the pandemic.”

“This means that masks are still required by staff, visitors and essential care partners while patient care is being delivered, in patient rooms and in waiting areas, including our emergency department. Sinai Health is a mask-friendly environment in all other areas where masks are not required,” Jennifer Specht noted.

Most Toronto hospitals eased their mask policies in April to allow workers to go without one in non-clinical areas where only staff congregate.

The mandatory masking requirement, however, had remained in effect for other areas of the hospital where patients could be present, including hallways, building lobbies and cafeterias.

The further easing of masking requirements at Toronto hospitals comes with Ontario seeing its lowest level of COVID-19 viral activity in more than a year, as monitored through the province’s wastewater surveillance program.

Other indicators are also rapidly improving.

There were also just 36 people hospitalized with COVID-19 in Toronto last week, down from double that number the month prior and hundreds earlier in the pandemic.

“I think it’s just fair to recognize that we’re in a different part of the pandemic now than we were three years ago and two years ago,” infectious disease specialist Dr. Isaac Bogoch told CP24.com on Wednesday. “You can look at trends with COVID in various communities throughout Ontario and we are just seeing far less COVID right now both in hospital settings and also in the community settings than we were months ago. So it is just policy keeping up with the current state.”

The new masking policies vary slightly from hospital to hospital but generally continue to mandate face coverings in emergency departments and waiting rooms where patients are present.

The policies also require that healthcare workers continue to wear masks when interacting directly with patients.

“Even with these new changes they’re still going to be masking with all patients encounters and I think that’s still very appropriate and I think it makes sense,” Bogoch told CP24.com. “The other important point to these changes is that in many of the areas of the hospital or wings of the hospital that care for immunocompromised individuals, for instance cancer wards, those masking rules still apply. So healthcare providers and other people coming into those areas will have to mask not only with direct patient contact but also in, for example, the hallways and the nursing stations as well. I think that makes a lot of sense too.”

The changes being made at Toronto hospitals come after [Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joseph’s Healthcare Hamilton introduced a new policy on June 1](#) which lifted the requirement for patients and visitors to wear masks at all “hospital sites.”

Healthcare workers at those hospitals have been instructed to use a risk assessment to “assess what personal protective equipment (PPE) they

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A health-care worker wearing PPE works on the computer in the dialysis unit at the Humber River Hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic in Toronto on Wednesday, December 9, 2020. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette

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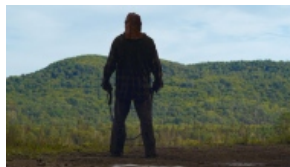


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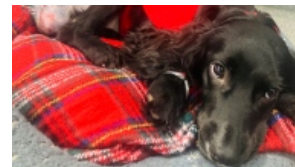
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