

Updated CDC COVID-19 Guidelines: No More Social Distancing, Quarantine, or Test-to-Stay for Schools



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The CDC has announced new COVID-19 guidelines that are less stringent than the previous recommendations. Leo Patrizi/Getty Images

- The revised guidelines are now the same for both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, reflecting the high levels of population immunity from vaccination, prior COVID-19 infection, or both.
- The new guidelines include a significant easing of social distancing and quarantine requirements.
- The CDC also no longer recommends “test to stay” for schools that allow children to remain in class as long as they test negative after exposure to the virus.
- Experts also acknowledge that the agency likely made these changes to better align with observed public behavior and changing attitudes toward COVID-19.

Changes to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) COVID-19 guidelines were announced on Thursday, according to an agency press release

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The revised guidance

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is explained in a new Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) and includes ending the recommendation that children in different classrooms avoid mixing, a practice called “cohorting.”

The CDC also no longer recommends “test to stay,” which allowed children in close contact with someone COVID-19 positive to remain in class as long as they tested negative for the virus.

“This guidance acknowledges that the pandemic is not over but also helps us move to a point where COVID-19 no longer severely disrupts our daily lives,” Greta Massetti, Ph.D., MPH, and MMWR author, said in a statement

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CDC guidelines will recognize differing risk factors

The revised guidelines will bring the recommendations for unvaccinated people in line with those who have been fully vaccinated, reflecting high levels of population immunity from vaccination, prior COVID-19 infection, or both.

Dr. Theodore Strange, associate chair of medicine at Staten Island University Hospital in Staten Island, New York, told [name removed] that we should use “common sense” regarding transmission risks.

Strange also advised we take precautions as the situation merits.

“If you’re going to be in an environment where you have an elderly grandmother, and you’re concerned, and it’s an allergy season, [and] you have some sniffles, put a mask on,” he said.

The virus will be with us for a long time

“Because this virus has become less virulent as it has gone on in its progression and mutations, this virus is going to be living with us for a long time,” said Strange.

According to Strange, the coronavirus has moved from infecting the lower respiratory tract to the upper respiratory tract, where it causes a cold and sore throat.

“It’s the cold virus,” he said. “What we’re actually seeing is people with cold symptoms and flu symptoms.”

Changes are an admission of reality

Dr. Bruce Farber, chief of public health and epidemiology at Northwell Health and the chief of infectious diseases at North Shore University Hospital and LIJ Medical Center, thinks changes like these are partly an “admission of reality” from the CDC.

“I can’t speak for the CDC, but I think in this particular case that their guidelines have to be, at least somewhat, in touch with what people are doing regardless of what their guidelines are,” he said.

He also believes that, in some respects, it’s an admission that the agency has lost the ability to make policies that are “really followed.”

“From that point of view, it’s a practical reality and whether the consequences of it will be significantly different than what otherwise would have occurred is far from clear,” he said. “I think we all know that people are not following most of those guidelines anyway.”

Learning to live with COVID-19

The new guidelines include easing social distancing and quarantine requirements.

“So we’re going to have to figure how we best can live with this without affecting society with lockdowns,” admitted Strange.

He also pointed out that we can’t have kids “walking around in school wearing masks all day.”

“It’s not good for their social health and mental health, physical health. It just doesn’t work,” he added.

He pointed out that vaccination is key to controlling the pandemic, saying that there's "no question" we want to protect the most vulnerable among us.

"And the best way to do that is with immunizations, no questions [about it], and the boosters," he said.

Fight against pandemic at a "stalemate"

Farber said we've reached a "stalemate" in our fight against the pandemic virus.

"The pandemic is obviously not over. You can call it endemic, you can call it a pandemic, but needless to say, I think it's obvious to everyone that COVID has not disappeared," he said.

"It is not disappearing and at no time in the foreseeable future, in my mind, probably our lifetimes, where COVID is going to be gone," he continued.

Farber did note that the virus is less virulent, and the "overwhelming majority" of the American population has some immunity to it.

"There are treatments for it," said Farber. "People who get vaccinated and get treated early rarely die."

Are enough children being vaccinated to justify the changes?

“Probably not, no,” said Farber.

He emphasized that vaccine uptake in the pediatric population has been “disappointing” to public health people, including himself.

“Some studies show that it’s only 30 percent. It all depends on what age group you look at,” he continued.

Farber pointed out that in the youngest age group, those under the age of five who may be in day care and other settings have a “fairly low” vaccination rate.

“So, no, I don’t think vaccination rates are particularly good,” he said.

Exceeding CDC guidelines by region

Farber believes it’s advisable for certain regions or localities to exceed the revised CDC recommendations.

“This is a big country ... we have 340 million people,” he said. “Rates vary frequently among different parts of the country, and I think yes, I think one size probably will not fit all.”

He said this is also because there’ll be “clusters and there’ll be events” in localized communities whether they’re super-spreader events or other COVID strains that crop up.

“That would merit that places have the ability to gear these [recommendations] to their local community rates and their local desires,” said Farber.

He warned that this is five times the number of people who die from flu every year and will probably continue to die of COVID.

“That’s why I call it a stalemate,” said Farber. “It’s certainly not gone. Anyone who thinks it’s gone is not seeing things the way they are.”

The bottom line

The CDC has announced new COVID-19 guidelines that are less stringent than the previous recommendations.

Experts say this is partly due to the agency losing its ability to set rules that will be followed by the public.

They also say that being vaccinated and getting our booster shots may be the best way to protect those people most vulnerable to the disease.