

# Despite New Safety Guidelines, Experts Say Movie Theaters Are High-Risk

Even with new safety guidelines in place, health experts say going to the movies is very risky during the pandemic. Getty Images

- Many movie theaters have begun reopening their doors to the public in states where they're able to do so.
- The National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) says more than 340 companies representing more than 32,000 screens across the United States have signed up to follow their Cinema Safe program.
- This outlines voluntary safety protocols that include mandating masks, reducing capacity, making hand sanitizer readily available, and limiting concessions.
- Even with new safety guidelines in place, health experts warn that going to movie theaters is a high-risk activity.

*All data and statistics are based on publicly available data at the time of publication. Some information may be out of date. Visit our [coronavirus hub](#) and follow our [live updates page](#) for the most recent information on the COVID-19 pandemic.*

In an attempt to return a few things back to normal, movie theaters across the United States have begun to reopen.

Makeshift drive-in movie theaters have been one way some cities have responded to having people be able to go out to the movies while still staying physically distant.

However, several major movie theater chains have announced they'll be reopening, and many already have.

This comes even as more than 40,000 new COVID-19 cases are reported each day, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), a trade group, announced its CinemaSafe program, which outlines voluntary safety protocols.

These include mandating masks, reducing the capacity of theaters, making hand sanitizer readily available, and limiting concessions, like self-serve "butter" for bags and tubs of popcorn.

"In this new pandemic world, moviegoers need to know that there is a consistent, science and experience-based set of health and safety protocols in place no matter what theater they visit," John Fithian, president and CEO of NATO, said in a statement.

NATO says that more than 340 companies representing more than 32,000 screens across the United States have signed up to follow these new guidelines.

But that doesn't include states like California, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York and North Carolina, where infection rates are too high for public health officials to allow movie theaters to reopen their doors.

AMC Theaters' trailers now remind patrons that masks are "required at all times, unless you are enjoying food or drinks," but tell people to keep their masks on if leaving the theater at any time.

While Disney chose to put its live-action reboot of "Mulan" onto its streaming service, some in Hollywood don't want to send their new releases straight to the small screen. This includes Christopher Nolan's "Tenet," the trailer for which ends with saying, "coming to theaters" on Sept. 2.

But not everyone is going to be there to see it. Many health experts say it's too early to be going back to movie theaters when many other parts of normal life haven't been able to return yet, like schools allowing children to come back for in-person instruction.

## **Health experts say it's "too soon" for movie theaters to reopen**

Dr. Chaitanya Mandapakala, a pulmonologist and intensive care doctor with St. Elizabeth Healthcare in Kentucky, says he loves superhero and Christopher Nolan movies.

“However, there is no movie that is good enough for me to risk going to a movie theater at this point,” he said.

“As a frontline physician managing COVID-19, I have a responsibility to the community to follow the highest standard of precautions against the virus.”

While he says going to movie theaters will be safest when there’s a COVID-19 vaccine available, Mandapakala suggests people stay away from theaters that are only following health guidelines to the bare minimum.

“Look online or call ahead to ensure that the theater is taking safety precautions seriously,” he said.

Dr. Vinisha Amin, a hospital medicine physician with the University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Health, says as more cities and counties think of opening their movie theaters, it’s important not to ignore medical data about how the coronavirus that causes COVID-19 spreads: through respiratory droplets.

That means when people remove their masks to eat popcorn, drink a soda, or laugh during the movie, their chances of potentially transmitting the coronavirus increases exponentially.

“Going to the movie theater is still medically considered a high-risk activity which can predispose greater numbers of individuals to acquire the virus,” Amin said.

“Having a cozy movie night with the immediate family within the comfort of one’s own home remains a great option.”

Mariea Snell, assistant director of the Online Doctor of Nursing Practice program at Maryville University, says she’s looking forward to “Wonder Woman 1984” and “Ghostbusters: Afterlife,” and that going to a movie theater carries the same amount of risk as going to a restaurant to eat.

“Nothing is without risk during this time,” she said.

Snell says drive-in movie theaters are a great way to stay safe and still get the movie-going experience, and has herself had several outdoor movie nights with friends.

“If you are outside and 6 feet or more apart, you dramatically improve your chances of not contracting COVID-19,” she said.

Dr. Supriya Narasimhan is the division chief of infectious diseases and medical director of infection prevention at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, a county that has been hit hard by COVID-19. She says counties should rely on their public health department to determine when indoor entertainment venues like movie theaters should reopen.

Sara Cody, Santa Clara County’s public health officer, has said that she would like the case rate to be less than 100 cases per 100,000 people for schools to open for in-person learning, according to Narasimhan.

But that's hard because infection rates vary city to city because the population and socioeconomics aren't homogenous.

"Extrapolating to the movie theater question, it is even harder to make such decisions because we cannot necessarily check the address and prevent people from one area with high COVID rates from going to an open theater in another area which has low COVID rates," Narasimhan said.

"So I would require a much lower county-wide transmission rate to open an indoor entertainment venue than say a school. But of course, this is a public health and political decision."

While Narasimhan says she's more of a fan of Marvel than a DC, she's looking forward to seeing Wonder Woman 1984. But she'll wait for it to hit streaming services and watch from home.