



One more time....

The presbytery is quite aware that sessions have the responsibility to plan and offer worship for their congregations. We also know that the last 14 months have provided congregations with many challenges and complicated decision making. We affirm that we want to get back to the things that unite and inspire, comfort, and sustain us. We celebrate with those who are fully vaccinated and are freer than they've been in quite some time. We acknowledge that some are still waiting for their vaccines or are not comfortable with the notion and must be cautious—and we must be considerate of one another.

We want to share a resource with you, hoping that it provides you with guidance (not mandate) as you carry on in this seemingly relentless season of pandemic. Respected knowledge is important to share, along with hearts and minds that listen for the Spirit and are guided by it.

Shared with permission, here is Presbytery of Cincinnati's Executive Presbyter (a ruling elder and an epidemiologist in a prior career) Lisa Allgood's note to her presbytery for this week:

"Friends, I thought today's love note should be a summary of the latest CDC guidance issued today:

- People who are fully vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus don't need to wear masks when walking, hiking, biking, running alone or gathering in small groups outside, federal health officials said, taking a major step to ease pandemic restrictions while encouraging more people to get shots. The same applies to dining at a restaurant outside, and to small outdoor gatherings that include some unvaccinated people, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Tuesday.
- Vaccinated people should still wear masks in public settings indoors and outdoors where there is a substantial risk of Covid-19 transmission, such as concerts, sporting events and other crowded gatherings, the CDC said.
- The fully vaccinated should also wear masks at indoor gatherings with unvaccinated people, visits to a barber, hair salon, shopping mall, museum, movie theater or house of worship. Vaccinated people should also wear masks if singing in an indoor chorus, the CDC said.

The new guidelines are the latest easing restrictions for vaccinated people. They follow mounting scientific evidence indicating the risk of infection is low outdoors, especially among people who are vaccinated. The risk of Covid-19 transmission by vaccinated people is low, evidence shows. Federal health officials said they hope the revisions will help persuade millions of people who are reluctant or otherwise haven't been inoculated to get the shot amid a recent decline in demand.

"The message is clear: 'You're vaccinated, guess what? You get to return to a more normal lifestyle. If you're not vaccinated, you're still in danger,'" Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said Tuesday in an interview with CBS This Morning.

The CDC, the federal government's public-health agency, sets the voluntary guidelines to steer local leaders. The agency has been setting and reworking guidelines throughout the pandemic, as its dynamics have changed and researchers developed better understanding of the virus. Many public-health authorities have for months encouraged masking as a key tool for reducing the risk of infection and transmission, though it has emerged as a political issue in some states.

Existing CDC guidance said that fully vaccinated people could gather privately in small groups without masks or physical distancing, and travel without putting themselves at serious risk or needing to quarantine as long as they wear masks and take other precautions.

With the new guidelines, federal officials are trying to help vaccinated people resume some aspects of a normal life while preventing further transmission of Covid-19.

Vaccination appears to help slow spread of the virus, health experts said. To relax pandemic restrictions, health authorities have been racing to inoculate more people as more transmissible variants have taken hold in the U.S.

More than a year of research and outbreak investigations have shown that the risk of catching the virus drops considerably outdoors. The research indicates the risk is higher indoors, where the tiny air particles carrying the virus are more likely to linger and circulate, especially in crowded places with poor ventilation or internally circulating air without ventilation.

"The data are overwhelming that the real risk is indoors," said John Brooks, chief medical officer for the CDC's Covid-19 response. Transmission outdoors isn't impossible, according to researchers, especially in more crowded conditions or where people may be breathing heavily while in proximity to others.

In a systematic review of outdoor transmission published in November in the Journal of Infectious Diseases, researchers concluded that five Covid-19 studies found that less than 10% of reported transmission reported in outdoor settings. The studies also showed that the odds of super-spreading are much lower outdoors.

"We have unlimited dilution and unlimited ventilation" outdoors, said Joseph Allen, director of the Healthy Buildings Program and an associate professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "We know that the biggest single risk factor for this virus is time indoors."

Rejoicing in the ability to visit some congregations in person again, and praying for the health, strength, and patience of all,

Jennifer