

# Evolving COVID-19 situation demands nimble response

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President

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With COVID-19 cases again surging across parts of the nation, growing concerns about the Delta variant, and a frustrating lack of progress vaccinating everyone eligible to receive it, the return to normalcy we had long hoped for this summer has ground to a halt.

Based on emerging data, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is now recommending that even fully vaccinated individuals return to wearing masks when indoors in areas of high and substantial transmission, while also recommending universal masking for all K–12 students, teachers, staff and visitors.

As frustrating as it may be, this is the right decision. And it is a reminder that we still have a lot of work ahead of us before this pandemic is over.

For physicians and health care workers on the front lines of this pandemic response since the beginning, the most recent resurgence is disheartening—and even a little maddening. It's maddening because unlike last year, when the best we could do against this novel coronavirus was to take action to limit its spread, we now have the means to defeat it.

## Vaccination is our best shot

Vaccination is the most important public health action we can take to end the COVID-19 pandemic. Data demonstrates that the vaccines are preventing severe illness, hospitalization and death.

To date, an estimated 70% of U.S. adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. However, vaccination rates vary greatly by state, and rates are nowhere near high enough to prevent the case surges taking place in many states.

Last week the AMA joined 55 other health care organizations and medical societies in support of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for all health care workers

and long-term care providers.

Universal vaccination of the health care workforce against COVID-19 is fully aligned with existing mandates that these workers receive vaccinations for influenza, hepatitis B and pertussis. And of course, such a mandate fulfills our profession's ethical obligation to always put patients first and help prevent transmission of the virus through unvaccinated staff members.

Further, a health care industry vaccine mandate can help persuade other employers, organizations and universities nationwide that the vaccines are safe and highly effective, and offer protection for employees as well as their coworkers, families and friends, and entire communities.

Exemptions can be made for those who cannot receive a vaccination due to identified medical reasons, and of course in accordance with pertinent state laws. Vaccines are at the core of an effective response to COVID-19, but that response is hamstrung by the sizable number of people who remain unvaccinated.

Back in mid-May, when the CDC advised that vaccinated people no longer needed to wear masks either indoors or out due to the protection the vaccines afforded them, cases of COVID-19 were steadily dropping. And although the vaccination rate was declining from the peak reached in April, almost a million Americans received a shot each day. The CDC reported that nearly half of all U.S. adults were fully vaccinated by May 30. A return to normalcy seemed within our reach.

But the situation changed for the worse in July, when the number of confirmed novel coronavirus cases jumped fourfold nationwide, largely due to the Delta variant and its increased propensity to spread. The number of COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths also rose substantially in areas experiencing outbreaks.

## **Pandemic fatigue is real**

I understand the frustration, disappointment or even outright anger that greeted the CDC's latest recommendation on masking.

Our nation has been living with COVID-19 for less than a year and half, but it seems like a lifetime. The virus has been an unmerciful foe, claiming more than 600,000 lives in our country and more than 4 million lives worldwide. We learned how to socially distance ourselves and dutifully wore our masks when leaving our homes, but did not make real progress toward reducing case counts, hospitalizations and deaths until vaccination rates steadily increased.

While many of us will take the CDC's latest recommendation, which is based on evolving evidence of

possible transmission of the Delta variant among vaccinated individuals, as their responsibility to protect us and those we love, some will express doubt. I understand that response—but it's important that we demonstrate resilience and resolve in defeating this pandemic by adopting the new CDC recommendations.

We have learned a lot about this virus since the pandemic began, most importantly that we cannot take any progress in defeating it for granted. The CDC's new recommendations on mask-wearing is prudent advice offered for our protection. Following it will help achieve the goal we all so desperately seek: an end to this pandemic and a true return to normalcy.