Amid new CDC advice, AMA president will mask up to protect others

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What’s the news: The physicians and scientists who lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have relaxed their mask recommendations for most of the U.S. population, including children in schools, based on community level indicators. The community level indicators are focused on severe cases that require hospital care and the use of health care resources.

The new COVID-19 metrics place more than 70% of the United States in areas of low or medium community levels. But in areas with high community levels, the CDC still advises everyone—including schoolchildren—to wear masks indoors in public places. This is the case for about 28% of the U.S. population.

The updated recommendations “reflect a new approach for monitoring COVID-19 in communities” that shows that vaccines work and “are effective in preventing severe COVID, hospitalization and death,” said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, who urged “all Americans to stay up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines, including getting a booster dose, when eligible.”

But Dr. Harmon, a family physician in South Carolina, shared a note of caution.

“We must grapple with the fact that millions of people in the U.S. are immunocompromised, more susceptible to severe COVID outcomes, or still too young to be eligible for the vaccine. In light of those facts, I personally will continue to wear a mask in most indoor public settings, and I urge all Americans to consider doing the same, especially in places like pharmacies, grocery stores, on public transportation—locations all of us, regardless of vaccination status or risk factors, must visit regularly,” he said.

“Although masks may no longer be required indoors in many parts of the U.S., we know that wearing a well-fitted mask is an effective way to protect ourselves and our communities, including the most vulnerable, from COVID-19—particularly in indoor settings when physical distancing is not possible,”
Dr. Harmon added.

“While the Omicron surge has declined, COVID-19 is not gone. We must remain adaptable and vigilant in confronting this unpredictable virus,” he said.

**Why it’s important:** The CDC’s COVID-19 community levels is a new tool to help families and communities decide what prevention steps to take based on the latest data, and come as cases plummet after the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant sent them surging.

The levels are low (green), medium (yellow) or high (orange) risk of severe disease and are determined by looking at the proportion of staffed hospital beds in use, hospital admissions, and the total number of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 in a community. At all levels, the CDC recommends that people stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccination and boosters while also getting tested if they have symptoms.

According to the CDC, people in areas deemed to have low community levels —about 29.5% of the population—no longer need to wear a mask indoors. In about 42.2% of communities considered medium risk, people who are at high risk for severe illness—such as those with compromised immune systems—should wear masks and speak with their physician about other precautions to take.

For the estimated 28.2% of Americans in areas with high risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection, masks should be worn indoors in public, including schools. Additional precautions should also be taken for people at high risk for severe illness.

These new recommendations do not change the requirement to wear masks on public transportation and indoors at airports, train stations and bus stations, though. And anyone who wants to wear a mask should continue to do so.

The CDC’s COVID-19 community levels are designed to help local public health and government officials make decisions based on their unique needs. That is because the metrics focus less on overall community SARS-CoV-2 transmission and more on what’s happening at local hospitals to escalate or ease up on individual and community mitigation efforts.

**Learn more:** Visit the AMA COVID-19 resource center for clinical information, guides and resources, and updates on advocacy and medical ethics.

The AMA has developed frequently-asked-questions documents on COVID-19 vaccination covering safety, allocation and distribution, administration and more. There are two FAQs, one designed to answer patients’ questions (PDF), and another to address physicians’ COVID-19 vaccine questions (PDF).
Read Dr. Harmon’s Leadership Viewpoints column, “Are you boosted? If you’re eligible, now’s the time to act.”