

CUYAHOGA COUNTY
BOARD OF HEALTH
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September 15, 2021

Universal Indoor Mask Advisory

On August 4th, a countywide recommendation strongly urging residents to wear masks in all indoor settings when around others and a plea for everyone to get vaccinated were made, in an attempt to blunt the surging Delta variant. This recommendation included universal masking for all staff and students in schools. These evidence-based public health recommendations followed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance for an area with substantial or high community spread of COVID-19.

Since that time, the Delta variant has continued to surge in Cuyahoga County and across the state and nation. Our current trajectory of cases has us rapidly approaching a level of countywide transmission that is four times the threshold identified by the CDC as "high transmission". Area hospitals are reporting that they have reached 80% of their capacity to treat patients who may present with any illness, just as flu season is starting and their admissions are predicted to increase. Restrictions on visitation and elective procedures will follow in order to handle the demand to treat COVID-19 patients of all ages.

We are also seeing significant increases in COVID-19 cases from exposures in the school environment, requiring isolation and quarantine of students and staff to reduce risk, interrupting the in-person education we know that children need. Most concerning are reports from area hospitals of an 80% increase in positivity rates among children presenting with COVID-19 symptoms over the last week and increases in the number of children being admitted to the hospital for care because of COVID. Clearly, conditions continue to deteriorate and the risk is rising.

If we want to keep our schools and workplaces open and more of our residents from getting COVID-19, we must meet the imperative to vaccinate more people now and embrace universal masking in all indoor environments when around others. To date, about 54% of residents in the community have been fully vaccinated and about 33% of African Americans and 44% of the Hispanic Latin X population have been fully vaccinated. This means that many people remain unvaccinated and vulnerable to contracting and spreading the Delta variant in the community. We urge everyone age 12 and older to get vaccinated as soon as they can. Vaccinations are readily available from the local health departments, pharmacies, hospitals, and community health centers.

We thank everyone that has already embraced indoor masking in schools, businesses and other public, social settings. However, we must do better. Now is the time for all of us to mask when around others who live outside of your family, regardless of your vaccination status. We have to embrace our shared

civic responsibility to protect and save as many lives as we can from the ravages of COVID-19 and protect our hospitals from being overrun and unable to treat those who need care.

Time is running out.

Today, County Executive Budish joins County Health Commissioner Terry Allan in issuing a Universal Indoor Masking Advisory for the whole community. We implore everyone to mask in all indoor environments when around others to prevent a deluge of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and fatalities that may be heading toward our community. We urge our businesses, non-profits, cities, villages, and townships to enforce the use of masks in all buildings. We urge schools to require masks for all students and staff so that kids can stay safe and learning in school.

Do it for the nurses, respiratory therapists, doctors, and other healthcare providers caring for our residents. Do it for the children who are not yet eligible to be vaccinated. Do it for our elderly and other vulnerable populations. Most of all, do it to save as many lives as we can in our community.

Now is the time.