

Masking De-Escalation FAQs – Effective March 22, 2023

Q: Why is WashU and BJC lifting the masking requirement now?

A: Based on sustained reduced incidence of COVID-19, influenza and respiratory viral illness hospitalizations and community transmission, the time has arrived to safely de-escalate masking requirements in our health care environment. Masking in our facilities served us well in protecting our patients, visitors and one another throughout the pandemic and during the severe respiratory illness surges we experienced this past fall and winter. As these illnesses abate, we are comfortable with relaxing the restrictions.

Q: Are there any situations when masks are still required?

A: Yes. Masking will still be required due to:

- Transmission-based precautions per policy (i.e., isolation signs, isolation policy)
- Occupational health (OH) requirements (e.g., cleared to work but still symptomatic, return to work after COVID infection)
- Specific stated request by the patient of clinician/employee providing care

In addition, to reduce workplace transmission, masking is strongly encouraged for employees who show signs or symptoms of respiratory illness who have been cleared to work and those with a recent known exposure to someone with a respiratory illness. It is also recommended for patients and visitors who show signs or symptoms of respiratory illness or with a recent known exposure to someone with a respiratory illness.

Q: Does this impact the personal protective equipment (PPE) employees use when caring for COVID-19 patients?

A: No, this masking update does not change what is required for the care of patients with COVID-19. An N95 respirator or PAPR/CAPR is still required for care of patients who are positive or suspected positive for COVID-19.

Q: Can people still wear masks if they want to?

A: Yes. Over the course of the pandemic, masking in health care facilities as well as other public areas has become an accepted part of life for many. Those who prefer to wear a mask are welcome to do so, including staff, patients, visitors and vendors. Respiratory hygiene stations will remain at all facilities, and masks will continue to be readily available for those who choose to mask or are asked to mask by a patient. Most important, clinicians and employees will need to mask when providing care to a patient who requests they mask.

Q: What does this mean for employees with vaccine exemptions?

A: All employees – whether vaccinated or vaccine-exempt – are still expected to self-assess for signs or symptoms of illness before reporting to work and to contact the occupational health call center at 314-362-5056 for evaluation of respiratory illness before coming to work. Those with vaccine exemptions will need to document that self-assessment before coming to work each day or wear a mask throughout their workday. The assessment can be done using [WashU's online screening tool](#).

Q: Will masks ever be required again for everyone in the future?

A: WashU and BJC may reinstate universal masking during surges of respiratory viruses (not exclusive to influenza). To guide these decisions, infection prevention, occupational health and infectious diseases specialists will continue to track case rates in the community and among staff, along with hospitalization rates to evaluate whether and when this would be reinstated.

Q: Does this mean the COVID-19 pandemic is over?

A: COVID-19 continues to circulate and mutate, and continues to cause infections, though at a lower level than previously. We will continue to track case rates in the hospital, in the community and among staff to evaluate whether we need to reinstate health and safety precautions in our facilities to protect patients, visitors and one another.