



After nearly two years of mandates, County follows state, will lift mask requirement March 12

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(<http://multco.us/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/notifications/if-you-or-your-household-receive-eviction-notice-nonpayment>)

[Update January 19: Protect yourself and your community by getting vaccinated for COVID-19. Get a booster when you are eligible. Masks are required in indoor settings in Oregon, vaccinated or not.](http://multco.us/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/notifications/update-january-19-protect-yourself-and-your-community)
(<http://multco.us/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/notifications/update-january-19-protect-yourself-and-your-community>)

March 1, 2022

Multnomah County will lift its local mask requirement beginning March 12, mirroring Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's [announcement Monday](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://mailchi.mp/oregon/news-releasegovernors-brown-newsom-and-inslee-announce-updated-health-guidance?e=8c0a6c7de6) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://mailchi.mp/oregon/news-releasegovernors-brown-newsom-and-inslee-announce-updated-health-guidance?e=8c0a6c7de6>) that she would lift a statewide mandate at midnight March 11.

It's the first time since August that residents won't be required to mask up in most public spaces. Masks will still be required in some areas, such as in healthcare settings, in shelters and on public transit. Businesses may also decide to continue requiring masks.

Health Officer Dr. Jennifer Vines, right alongside Public Health Director Jessica Guernsey brief the Board of Commissioners March 1, 2022 during a routine briefing on the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are in a good place. Spring is coming. Cases are dropping," Health Officer Dr. Jennifer Vines told the Board of Commissioners on Tuesday during a [routine briefing](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.youtube.com/c/MultCoBoard) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.youtube.com/c/MultCoBoard>) on the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There's still a lot of anxiety around changes ahead, and we still have communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic."

By the second week in January, cases had begun to fall, along with the percentage of tests that come back positive. And both continued to drop precipitously in the following weeks. More important than that, Vines said, hospitalizations are dropping.

During the Omicron surge, 40 percent of people who were counted as hospitalized with COVID-19 were actually seeking care for something else, and tested positive in the course of their hospital stay.

"Omicron, as we suspected, was on the whole less severe," Vines said.

Vaccines have also been proven to provide strong protection against serious illness. An analysis of local data showed that during the Delta surge, fully vaccinated people were 83% less likely to be hospitalized. During the Omicron surge, fully vaccinated people were 74% less likely to be hospitalized; and people with a third booster dose were 84% less likely to be hospitalized.

And while some communities of color remain overrepresented in test positivity and case counts overall, local data showed a lower proportion of Black and Latinx people being hospitalized compared to Whites.

Multnomah County's high vaccination rate, coupled with the wide community spread of the Omicron variant, which also translate to increased immunity to the virus, puts the County in a good place headed into spring, Public Health Director Jessica Guernsey told commissioners.

“Right now we’re in a good place,” she said, but some people won’t be ready to give up those extra layers of protection that masks provide. She urged the community to understand and support them.

“We’ve been through a lot the last couple of years, and it’s understandable if some people feel hesitant,” she said

And everyone should hold onto their masks for a while longer, even if they aren’t wearing them, she said. While health officials are optimistic about a manageable level of disease right now, a new variant or a seasonal shift could mean renewed recommendations to wear masks.

It wouldn’t be the first time that disease trends forced officials to adjust their guidance on when and whether to mask up.

Masks on. Masks off. Masks on.

Multnomah County recorded its first official case of COVID-19 on March 10, 2020.

Tests were hard to find and unreliable. It would be nearly a year before an effective vaccine was widely available. Health officials had few other preventative measures to propose for people who had to gather in person. That month the Governor [issued a stay-home order](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/governor-kate-brown-orders-residents-stay-home-closes-additional) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/governor-kate-brown-orders-residents-stay-home-closes-additional>). During that pause in public life, health officials discussed the potential benefits and risks of a mask mandate. By April 3, 2020, they [began recommending](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/health-officials-add-cloth-face-coverings-public-health-steps-avoid) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/health-officials-add-cloth-face-coverings-public-health-steps-avoid>) people wear a face covering in public indoor spaces.

By June, as research mounted showing face coverings helped prevent the spread of COVID-19, the County included a mask requirement as part of its [plans to lift restrictions](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-approved-reopening-region-freezes-least-3-weeks) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-approved-reopening-region-freezes-least-3-weeks>) on in-person dining and other businesses.

Then on June 24, 2020, a state mandate went into effect [requiring residents](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/state%E2%80%99s-face-covering-mandate-effect-today-county-encourages) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/state%E2%80%99s-face-covering-mandate-effect-today-county-encourages>) to wear face coverings in certain public indoor spaces in seven Oregon counties, including Multnomah County. With lingering concerns about enforcing a mandate, Multnomah County focused on making face coverings available to those most at risk of severe disease.

A week later, with case counts climbing across the state, Gov. Brown [extended her mandate](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/face-covering-mandate-goes-statewide-oregon-osha-enforce-business) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/face-covering-mandate-goes-statewide-oregon-osha-enforce-business>) statewide and enlisted Oregon Occupational Safety and Health and other state agencies to enforce the requirement.

Nearly a year later, in late May 2021, the state [prepared to lift all restrictions](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-moves-low-risk-thursday-may-27-recommends-masks-all) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-moves-low-risk-thursday-may-27-recommends-masks-all>), including mask requirements, even as case counts remained high. Multnomah County health officials recommended people continue wearing masks in any indoor public spaces for the time being.

Then in July 2021, after the Delta variant had become the predominant strain in Oregon, Multnomah County reemphasized its continuing mask guidance, issuing a [universal mask recommendation](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-issues-universal-mask-recommendation-covid-19-cases) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-issues-universal-mask-recommendation-covid-19-cases>). “We have an opportunity to make a difference in our county’s case rates right now,” Guernsey, the County’s public health director, said at the time. “But if we don’t act, we can expect an exponential rise in cases.”

Two weeks later Chair Deborah Kafoury [announced an executive order](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-chair-issues-executive-order-mandating-masks-all) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/https://www.multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/news/multnomah-county-chair-issues-executive-order-mandating-masks-all>) that legally required individuals and businesses to comply with the countywide rule. Two days later Gov. Brown signed [an administrative order](https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/http://records.sos.state.or.us/ORSOSWebDrawer/Recordhtml/8581038) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220302025723/http://records.sos.state.or.us/ORSOSWebDrawer/Recordhtml/8581038>) requiring masks be worn statewide.

This is a good day

Commissioners celebrated the drop in cases during Tuesday's briefing, but they worried that some people might feel pressure to conform to a new, maskless world, or face confusion about what is driving the change in policy.

"This is a good day," Commissioner Stegmann said. "But I do worry that some people will conflate wearing a mask with different ideologies."

"It has been very confusing and challenging," Chair Kafoury acknowledged. "This is the third time the state has shifted the date, and not really for scientific or public health reasons. I feel for our employees and the public who are struggling to understand why the state keeps changing."

Stegmann asked whether the County would continue to require masks in its buildings.

"We will follow state guidance," Chair Deborah Kafoury said, although there are areas of operations that will continue to require masks, such as in detention facilities and healthcare settings.

"At some point we will shift that guidance as well," she said.