

USET Tribal Epidemiology Center

Recommendations for Tribal Consideration

USET TEC COVID-19 Guidance 2021-01: Preventative Measures for Fully Vaccinated Individuals



Background

More than a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, this global disaster has had an untold cost on human life, particularly for minority populations across the United States. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#), American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) are 3.5 times more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID-19 and 2.4 times more likely to die from the disease compared to White, Non-Hispanic persons. Fortunately, since December 2020, there have been ongoing efforts to vaccinate the public with three approved vaccines that provide strong protection against COVID-19. Currently, according to the CDC's Vaccine Tracker, approximately one-third of the total US population has been fully vaccinated, including 45% of adults. Among AI/AN individuals, 27% of the Indian Health Service (IHS) population has been fully vaccinated and, among USET Tribal Nation states, this percentage currently ranges from 26-46%. Experts predict that for the US to reach a state of herd immunity where COVID-19 spread is controlled, the percentage of fully vaccinated individuals should be around 70-80%. While these statistics show the promising possibility of ending the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, there is still much progress to be made. It is the USET Tribal Epidemiology Center's (TEC) position that safety precautions, including masking, should remain in place for fully vaccinated individuals until a higher proportion of the population has been vaccinated in order to keep the risk of COVID-19 low. The USET TEC would also like to stress that we are available for [consultation](#) should Tribal Nations, under their sovereign authority, need assistance in developing/modifying their policies.

CDC Vaccination Criteria

The CDC considers individuals to be [fully vaccinated](#) for COVID-19 either:

- ≥ 2 weeks after they receive the second dose in a 2-dose series (Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna) OR
- ≥ 2 weeks after they receive a single-dose vaccine (Johnson and Johnson/J&J-Janssen)

Transmission of SARS-CoV-2

An important consideration in creating recommendations to prevent transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is the mode of transmission. The CDC states that [SARS-CoV-2 is spread both through contact with large droplets containing the virus as well as smaller particles, or aerosols](#). Large droplets generally fall quickly to the ground and so pose the greatest risk in close contact. Aerosols can be a higher risk as they can remain suspended in enclosed spaces for lengthier periods of time. In either case, maintaining a physical distance of approximately six (6) feet between persons is recommended to reduce the risk of being exposed to any particles. In situations where this is not possible, such as indoor spaces or at large crowded gatherings, it is important to wear a mask in order to prevent inhaling or exhaling respiratory particles containing the virus.

Previous Recommendations

The CDC [previously recommended](#) several different precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, primarily avoiding large groups, physical distancing, and wearing masks. Their previous update to the precaution guidance suggested that both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals could participate in outdoor activities without masking or maintaining social distancing. However, masks were still advised for both unvaccinated and vaccinated individuals who were attending large outdoor gatherings. In addition, they recommended that fully vaccinated individuals should still wear masks indoors in large multi-household gatherings, including exercise groups, places of worship, and dining.

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New Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated Individuals

Despite the limited proportion of the population that have been fully vaccinated, the CDC has revised its previous recommendations for fully vaccinated individuals to allow no mask wearing in the majority of spaces. The new guidelines state there is no need to wear masks either indoors or outdoors if fully vaccinated, regardless of the size of the gatherings. In addition, there is no need to test [before or after traveling, quarantine after traveling, or quarantine and test after possible COVID-19 exposure](#). Essentially, fully vaccinated individuals may [resume normal activities](#) without masking or physical distancing. The only exceptions to this recommendation are on public transportation, in medical settings, or where a different policy is enacted by state, local, or Tribal governments.

USET TEC Recommendations for Tribal Leaders

Although the CDC's recommendations for fully vaccinated individuals indicate promising movement towards the end of the pandemic, there is still cause for concern. While vaccination offers almost complete protection against contracting COVID-19, none of the available vaccines are 100% effective. Furthermore, while this guidance only applies to fully vaccinated individuals, there is no guarantee that unmasked persons are fully vaccinated; without such a guarantee, appropriate precautions must be maintained in order to effectively control the spread of this deadly virus.

COVID-19 has disproportionately hurt Native American communities, not merely due to the excess deaths suffered, but through the loss of cultural knowledge and traditions that elders may no longer be able to pass down. Our responsibility to the next generations means that we must take measures to protect our communities even if it means a degree of caution over what the CDC recommends. While the USET TEC does not disagree with the recommendations for testing before/after traveling, quarantine after travel, or quarantining after an exposure, we feel it is premature to lift such a vital precaution as masking when currently only a small proportion of our communities have been fully vaccinated. That said, we stress, regardless of any CDC, federal, state, local, or USET TEC guidance and recommendations, it is always your sovereign obligation, right, and authority to make decisions that are specific to the circumstances, situations, and needs within your Nation.

On this basis, USET encourages physical distancing as a simple means of controlling the spread of many diseases, including COVID-19. However, in situations when physical distance cannot be maintained, the USET TEC recommends that vaccinated individuals continue to mask:

- Indoors during large gatherings or group activities.
- Indoors at small multi-household activities if not all individuals are fully vaccinated.
- Outdoors during large gatherings (e.g., powwows, sports events, tournaments).

The USET TEC is in agreement with CDC's recommendations that unvaccinated individuals should continue to mask:

- Indoors during any activities not involving members of the immediate household.
- Outdoors at any small multi-household gatherings where all parties are not fully vaccinated.
- Outdoors during large gatherings (e.g., powwows, sports events, tournaments).

These recommendations reflect USET's translation of the CDC's guidance after taking into account particular factors that affect our member Tribal Nations. As stated above, Tribal Leaders may choose to implement any of these recommendations according to what they feel would be most beneficial to their own communities.

Resources

CDC: [Science Brief: Background Rationale and Evidence for Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People](#)

CDC: [When You've Been Fully Vaccinated](#)

CDC: [Guidance for Wearing Masks](#)

CDC: [Choosing Safer Activities](#)

CDC: [Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death By Race/Ethnicity](#)

Johns Hopkins School of Public Health: [Achieving Herd Immunity with COVID-19](#)

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