

## **As COVID cases flare, some schools and businesses reinstate mask mandates**

A familiar pandemic-era safety measure is making a comeback as new COVID-19 variants surface and cases of the disease flare in some parts of the U.S.: Mask mandates.

The number of COVID-19 cases has climbed for several weeks, with health authorities saying they're tracking the spread of three new variants. As a result, some businesses and other institutions are again requiring people to wear masks, which have proved an effective tool for slowing the spread of the virus.

Like vaccine requirements, cities and states have widely dropped mask mandates as COVID rates have dropped since peaking in 2022. In February, for example, New York state dropped a requirement that face coverings be worn even in health care settings, in line with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, after most other local businesses had already nixed mandates voluntarily.

"There will be no parties"

Morris Brown College in Atlanta this week announced that the small liberal arts school is reinstating its mask mandate for two weeks, citing COVID cases among students. As of Tuesday, the school required that all students and staff members wear masks, according to a statement from college president Dr. Kevin James. The college is also imposing restrictions on event sizes, including parties, and is resuming efforts to trace infections.

"There will be no parties or large student events on campus for the next two weeks," the school said. The college is also asking students who test positive for COVID-19 to isolate for at least five days and to attend class virtually while in isolation.

The latest CDC data shows that COVID-19 hospitalizations are up 30% across Georgia, driven by the spread of new variants.

In California, with cases of the virus rising in Los Angeles, movie studio Lionsgate is reinstating an in-office mask mandate at its Santa Monica headquarters, Deadline first reported. Lionsgate said a number of employees had recently tested positive for COVID-19, according to the report.

Lionsgate is also reviving other safety measures. All employees are required to perform a self-screening for COVID symptoms daily before reporting to the office, according to Deadline.

Employees with symptoms, or those who have recently returned from international travel, are asked to stay home and notify the company's response manager, the publication reported, citing an internal company email.

Lionsgate could not immediately be reached for comment.

As of Aug. 12, 330 Los Angeles County residents were hospitalized with COVID-19, according to the city's department of public health.

In Northern California, health care company Kaiser Permanente has reintroduced a mask mandate at its Santa Rosa hospital and medical offices "in response to this latest increase in COVID-19 cases," a spokesperson said in an email to CBS MoneyWatch. It applies to physicians, staff, patients, members and visitors.

"Respiratory protection and the use of masking is an important component in keeping our health care workers, physicians and patients safe," the company added in a statement.

"Bent out of shape"

Some experts fear it could be hard to convince Americans to don masks again even if COVID cases continue to rise. Dr. Danielle Ompad, an epidemiologist at the NYU School of Global Public Health, said "it's a bit like putting the genie back in the bottle." Still, she has personally started wearing a mask again recently in crowded places, where the risk of exposure is greater.

"If I were with people who aren't public health-trained, I would wear a mask, particularly in crowded situations, because I really don't have time for COVID. Mask mandates are challenging because they make people really bent out of shape out of proportion to the ask."

Dr. Carole Lieberman, a board-certified psychiatrist who is also trained in public health, called the return of mask mandates "triggering" for some people.

"These new warnings about rising COVID-19 rates are affecting people in different ways. For some, it's triggering renewed fears of getting sick and dying," she told CBS MoneyWatch. "For others, it's fear of being told what to do — from masks to vaccines to lockdowns. We now know the impact of some of these mandates — like kids missing out on school, loss of businesses, jobs and money — so we are as fearful of this as we are of COVID-19."