

Because of new public indoor masking recommendations, dental practices may be receiving an increased number of questions from team members and patients. Use this resource to help your practice make informed decisions and facilitate conversations around masking in public areas like waiting rooms.

**Please note:**

- The CDC masking recommendations apply to patients and the general public.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration's masking requirement for health care workers is still in effect.
- If your state or local jurisdiction has guidelines, you need to adhere to those guidelines or mandates.

## What is the current CDC recommendation for wearing masks indoors?

There are two sets of CDC recommendations that have implications to guide the decision on whether to require masks in dental practice public areas, like waiting areas and team rooms.

## Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Healthcare Personnel During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic

[Healthcare settings](#) should continue to use community transmission rates as a guide and continue to follow CDC's infection prevention and control recommendations. However, the executive order under OSHA with respect to some healthcare settings (e.g. federally-funded programs such as community dental health centers and federally-funded hospitals) remains in effect. In the vast majority of cases, the CDC's new COVID-19 Community Levels recommendations do not apply in other healthcare settings, which include most dental facilities.

## COVID-19 Community Levels Recommendations

Revised indoor public guidelines issued February 25, 2022, indicated indoor masks are no longer necessary for most individuals in areas with low COVID-19 community levels.

As opposed to focusing on high COVID-19 transmission levels, the new recommendations take into account three different metrics (new COVID-19 hospitalizations, hospital capacity and new COVID-19 cases) tracked within the new [COVID-19 Community Level](#) tool, which can be used to determine your county's risk level and masking guidance:

- Low COVID-19 Community Level
  - Masks are not required but can be worn based on personal preference or level of risk.
- Medium COVID-19 Community Level
  - If you are immunocompromised or at [high risk for severe illness](#), consult with your healthcare provider about strategies to lower your risk of transmission, including wearing a mask.
  - Consider testing yourself and wearing a mask indoors if you live with or are visiting a loved one at high risk for severe illness.

- High COVID-19 Community Level
  - Wear a well-fitting mask indoors in public settings, regardless of vaccination status or individual risk. Individuals who are immunocompromised or at risk for severe illness should wear a mask or respirator that provides greater protection.

No matter the community risk level, wearing a mask or respirator is still strongly recommended if you are sick with COVID-19 or you are caring for a loved one who has COVID-19. Masks are also still required on public transportation and inside transportation centers like airports or train stations.

## What are my options as a practice owner?

If your state or local jurisdiction has guidelines, **you need to adhere to those guidelines or mandates.**

If no state or local guidelines apply, dental practices need to decide whether they are going to align with healthcare setting guidance or community level guidance in their public areas.

- If **healthcare setting guidance** is being followed, indoor masking in all areas continues in dental offices.
- If the **COVID-19 Community Level** guidance is being followed, in low community level U.S. counties, a practice has essentially two choices: require masking in all public areas, or permit staff and patients to choose for themselves whether they will mask in common public areas. In making this decision, a number of factors might be considered, including the practice owner's risk tolerance, sensibilities of the staff and patient base, and business concerns that may be affected by the decision.
  - If a practice chooses to continue masking in all public areas, here are things you may consider:
    - If I continue to require masking in common areas, will my staff or patient base object (or worse, leave the practice or not consider joining)? Know your demographics and understand the potential impact your decision may have on the practice from a financial and staffing perspective.
    - What will the practice do if a patient or staff member refuses to comply? Will you allow any exceptions? Be prepared to address the issue should it arise.
  - If a practice chooses to go mask optional in public areas, here are things you may consider:
    - Will my staff and patient base be comfortable with my decision? Will they feel supported in choosing to continue wearing a mask while others opt not to? If they are not comfortable, might they leave the practice in favor of a practice that still requires masking?

## What do I still need to follow if I choose to follow the COVID-19 Community Level guidance?

It is important to distinguish between when masks are *required* versus when community levels are low enough to *permit* patients and staff to forego masking. Whether a practice chooses to continue requiring masking in common areas or to permit patients and staff to choose for themselves, certain requirements and legal obligations remain the same. While treating patients, staff will still be required to wear proper PPE. Likewise, low community levels do not change any obligation the practice has to abide by federal, state or local requirements masks in certain instances (e.g., some healthcare settings). The practice may still need to accommodate disabled staff members and OSHA workplace safety rules continue to apply. Negligence in rolling out a mask-optional policy remains potentially actionable, as does workers' compensation coverage for staff members who can prove they were infected in the workplace.

It's also important to understand that the CDC is not a regulatory body and does not have the power to enforce its recommendations as mandates/rules; however, other government agencies may adopt and enforce CDC recommendations, or your practice, itself, may choose to adhere to the recommendations.

## Do front office staff need to wear masks?

This [hazard assessment resource](#) can help dental offices make an informed decision based on several contributing factors. OSHA's ETS is still in place, and if, for example, a team member is asked to check temperatures, there is an increased level of exposure if they are not wearing a mask. The CDC mask guidance is for the public, and practices still have a responsibility to protect healthcare facility employees.

Practices may choose not to require front office staff to wear masks in common areas unless there is a legal requirement otherwise under federal, state or local law. For example, masks are still required for FQHCs and hospitals receiving federal funds.

## How should I communicate about masking in public areas to my patients?

**Emphasize your concern for their overall health.** Communicate that as health professionals, you are following strict COVID-19 protocols during all exams and procedures, regardless of which guidance you decide are applicable to the public areas of your practice. If you choose to follow the COVID-19 Community Level guidance, be clear that you are consistently monitoring levels and will adapt protocols in accordance with the level. You may want to communicate your schedule of monitoring if applicable.

**Respect that patient opinions vary, and approach the conversation with empathy.** People have various concerns around the virus, infection risk and masking in general, so it is important to listen and respect that it is not a “one-size-fits-all” conversation. As always, showing concern and respect for individual situations is essential.

**Use these resources as starting points for conversations with patients.** If you choose to continue following healthcare guidance, here are printable signs, sample text messages, phone scripts and email language to weave into your communications.

## If following CDC healthcare guidance:

### Printable Sign

- [Download PDF](#)

### Text message:

*Consider adding the following to appointment reminder text messages:*

Please remember to bring a mask to your next visit. Masks are required in our waiting area, per CDC guidance for healthcare facilities.

### Phone script:

*Consider adding the following information when you or your team is speaking with patients about upcoming appointments:*

Masks are required in our waiting area, per CDC guidance for healthcare facilities. We'd appreciate if you remember to bring a mask with you to your upcoming visit. Your health is our top priority, and our entire team is following strict safety protocols to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

### Email:

*Consider adding the following language to emails sent from your practice:*

As we continue to adapt to the changing nature of COVID-19, our office follows the CDC's guidance for healthcare settings. This means masks are required in our waiting area, and we'd appreciate it if you remember to bring one with you to your upcoming appointment.

Your health and safety are our top priorities, and our practice will adhere to strict COVID-19 safety protocols like wearing proper personal protective equipment (including masks) and following enhanced cleaning protocols during your exam or procedure to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Please let us know if you have any questions before or during your visit. We look forward to seeing you!

# Indoor Masking in Dental Practice Public Spaces



## If following CDC public indoor guidance:

### *Low community level:*

#### **Printable Sign:**

- [Waiting area LOW level sign \(PDF\)](#)
- [For hallways or areas outside the waiting room where masks need to be worn \(PDF\)](#)

#### **Text message:**

*Consider adding the following to appointment reminder text messages:*

Because our COVID-19 Community Level is LOW, masks are welcome but not required in our waiting area, per CDC public indoor guidance. Dental team masking and other strict COVID-19 safety protocols will continue to be followed during all exams and procedures.

#### **Phone script:**

*Consider adding the following information when you or your team is speaking with patients about upcoming appointments:*

Because our CDC COVID-19 Community Level is LOW, masks are welcome but not required in our waiting area, per CDC public indoor guidance. Our dental team will continue wearing masks and following strict COVID-19 safety protocols during all exams and procedures because your health and safety are our top priorities.

#### **Email:**

*Consider adding the following language to emails sent from your practice:*

As we continue to adapt to the changing nature of COVID-19, our office continues to monitor the COVID-19 Community Level. Currently, our level is LOW, which means masks are welcome but not required in our waiting area, per CDC public indoor guidance. We frequently monitor our local levels and will require indoor masking in our waiting area if our local level is upgraded to HIGH.

One thing that will not change at your upcoming visit is the adherence to strict COVID-19 safety protocols during your exam or procedure. Your health and safety are our top priorities, and the dental team will continue wearing all proper personal protective equipment (including masks), following enhanced cleaning protocols and more.

Please let us know if you have any questions before or at your visit. We look forward to seeing you!

# Indoor Masking in Dental Practice Public Spaces

## *Medium level:*

### **Printable Sign:**

- [Waiting area MEDIUM level sign \(PDF\)](#)
- [For hallways or areas outside the waiting room where masks need to be worn \(PDF\)](#)

### **Text message:**

*Consider adding the following to appointment reminder text messages:*

Because our CDC COVID-19 Community Level is MEDIUM, masks are encouraged in our waiting area if you or a loved one is at high risk for severe illness. Dental team masking and other strict COVID-19 safety protocols will continue to be followed during all exams and procedures.

### **Phone script:**

*Consider adding the following information when you or your team is speaking with patients about upcoming appointments:*

Because our CDC COVID-19 Community Level is MEDIUM, masks are welcome but not required in our waiting area per CDC public indoor guidance. We do encourage you to wear one if you or a loved one is at risk for severe illness, in accordance with the CDC guidelines. Our dental team will continue wearing masks and following strict COVID-19 safety protocols during all exams and procedures because your health and safety are our top priorities.

### **Email:**

*Consider adding the following language to emails sent from your practice:*

As we continue to adapt to the changing nature of COVID-19, our office continues to monitor the COVID-19 Community Level as part of CDC public indoor guidance. Currently, our level is MEDIUM, which means masks are welcome but not required in our waiting area. If you or a loved one are at severe risk for illness from COVID-19, we encourage you to wear a mask in all public indoor areas, including ours, per CDC guidelines. We frequently monitor our local levels and will require indoor masking in our waiting area if our local level is upgraded to HIGH.

One thing that will not change at your upcoming visit is our practice's adherence to strict COVID-19 safety protocols during your exam or procedure. Your health and safety are our top priorities, and the dental team will continue wearing all proper personal protective equipment (including masks), following enhanced cleaning protocols, and more.

Please let us know if you have any questions before or at your visit. We look forward to seeing you!

# Indoor Masking in Dental Practice Public Spaces



## High level:

### Printable Sign:

- [Waiting area HIGH level sign \(PDF\)](#)
- [For hallways or areas outside the waiting room where masks need to be worn \(PDF\)](#)

### Text message:

*Consider adding the following to appointment reminder text messages:*

Please remember to bring a mask to your next visit. Because our CDC COVID-19 Community Level is HIGH, masks are required in our waiting area, per CDC public indoor guidance.

### Phone script:

*Consider adding the following information when you or your team is speaking with patients about upcoming appointments:*

Because our COVID-19 Community Level is HIGH, masks are required in our waiting area, per CDC guidance. We'd appreciate it if you remember to bring a mask with you to your upcoming visit. Your health is our top priority, and our entire team is following strict safety protocols to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

### Email:

*Consider adding the following language to emails sent from your practice:*

As continue to adapt to the changing nature of COVID-19, our office continues to monitor the COVID-19 Community Level as part of CDC public indoor guidance. Currently, our level is HIGH, which means masks are required in our waiting area. We continuously monitor our local levels and will revisit our masking requirements in the waiting area when levels lower.

Regardless of community levels, one thing that has not changed is our practice's adherence to strict COVID-19 safety protocols during your exam or procedure. Your health and safety are our top priorities, and the dental team will continue wearing all proper personal protective equipment (including masks), following enhanced cleaning protocols and more.

Please let us know if you have any questions before or during your visit. We look forward to seeing you!