



MEMORANDUM

To: Gillings Community

From: Barbara K. Rimer, DrPH, Dean and Alumni Distinguished Professor *BR*
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Date: Friday, March 4, 2022

Subject: Change in local mask requirement effective March 7

We hope you are well! This week, the [Orange County Health Department announced](#) that, effective March 7, it “*will no longer require masks in public, indoor spaces if key COVID-19 metrics continue to reach medium and low community levels.*” Closely following this announcement, we [heard](#) from the chancellor and university leaders that, **as of Monday, March 7, UNC-Chapel Hill will drop the mandate requiring people to wear masks in buildings, classrooms, dorms and other spaces on the Chapel Hill campus.** Masks will still be required on Chapel Hill transit and in all health care settings. No longer mandating masks is a policy and regulatory statement, but it should not interfere with good judgment, and we will provide a few examples of that.

Gillings is part of the University, the UNC System and Orange County. As we have emphasized in previous communications, the Gillings School is part of the university and UNC System and, as such, we must uphold UNC policies and are not permitted to adopt or enforce our own mask policies. Similarly, as part of the larger public health community, we follow local health department guidance and support their work and, indeed, many Gillings faculty and staff have been offering their expertise to local and state officials establishing latest guidance.

Adapting to change. As we know, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is an ever-evolving situation that requires changes in approach as the situation changes. Just as we prepared to mitigate risk when the virus arrived, now that cases of infection and hospitalizations have dropped rapidly, we must prepare to adjust once again. This is a difficult challenge. There will never be zero risk of infection; immunocompromised and other individuals will remain at higher risk; and health equity concerns need to be considered with every decision. This is where we must move forward thoughtfully, carefully, and respectfully, minimizing risk, using the powerful tools available to fight COVID (e.g., vaccines, boosters, rapid tests, antivirals and yes, masks), and empowering individuals to make decisions about how to navigate this path forward. Here we share some thoughts for how we can continue to work together to support each other and keep people safe.

We can still wear our masks. Masks are no longer required, but we can still wear them, as they add an excellent layer of protection for ourselves and those around us. And we can choose the places and conditions in which we wear a mask. Some very good reasons to consider wearing a mask include:

- Being personally at higher risk for serious health outcomes, if infected;
- Living or meeting with friends, family members, instructors and classmates who have a health issue putting them at higher risk for a serious health outcome;

- Protecting yourself or people in your immediate circle who are unable to receive vaccines (e.g., children under age 5; certain immunocompromised people);
- Supporting people in your community (including at Gillings) who must be in crowded spaces but who are vulnerable for any of the above reasons;
- Or simply because you are not ready to take the risk of going unmasked.

As we adjust to our mask-optional environments, we can continue to monitor COVID cases and impacts in our communities via [CDC's COVID Data tracker](#) and [UNC's COVID dashboard](#). These data may help you in your daily decisions as to whether and where to continue masking for yourself and family.

Classroom activities. We continue to operate with our touchstones of adaptability, flexibility and kindness as we navigate the spring semester. **Free masks still are available throughout Gillings buildings, including N95 or KN95 masks in key locations.** All of us may choose to wear a mask when in the classroom and in our buildings. At the same time, nobody should be penalized for *not* wearing a mask. Please continue to show respect and understanding as people try to make the best decisions they can, given their circumstances. A few brief notes:

- Instructors, please continue to provide flexibility to students in their requests to participate in class remotely.
- All, if a class was approved for a change in mode of instruction, that approval still stands. Instructors may also temporarily move to remote learning for a short period due to illness or other reasons and may ask for a formal accommodation through the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (with approval by the department chair and Senior Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs) if they need to offer remote learning for a longer period.
- All, as we have throughout the pandemic, we still ask people to stay home, get tested, seek medical attention if appropriate, and wear a mask if they have any symptoms consistent with COVID or have been in contact recently with someone who has tested positive for COVID.

We are a community. As we have done throughout this pandemic, reach out to friends, colleagues and instructors to provide – and access – support through this transition. The Gillings School sponsors a range of [support pods](#), and our [Culture of Health website](#) provides links to many resources for mental health and wellness, including UNC-Chapel Hill's new [Heels Care Network](#), a comprehensive searchable and filterable database of mental health resources with a Live Chat feature to support all members of the campus community — students, family, staff and faculty. As always, students may access support through Counseling and Psychological Services ([CAPS](#)) and [other resources](#); and employees may access support via the Employee Assistance Program ([EAP](#)) and [other resources](#).

Take a moment to be grateful. While things are not as good as we might wish, and many parts of the U.S. and world are at greater risk than we are in Orange County, we have made great progress. We can celebrate the fact that we are moving from mandatory to personal-choice masking. This may require negotiation among groups when someone is at higher risk for poor outcomes if they contract COVID-19. We should have no illusions that we are returning to pre-pandemic normal, but we are in a better place.

Commencement. See the website for [information about commencement](#). It will be in person, with whatever precautions are necessary at the time. We meet frequently to fine-tune plans, including where food will be served. Based on fall and winter commencement ceremonies, we are confident we can host a safe event.

Stay tuned! We will share a brief set of FAQs soon to help answer some questions you may have. Also, we are lining up a Covid Conversation as soon as possible so we can all learn more about how to negotiate changes ahead of us as our society transitions to a period when the virus is endemic. We will announce a date and time soon. Thank you, once again, for all you are doing to support the Gillings community throughout the pandemic!