

Masking After Vaccination

Across the country, people are anxiously waiting for life to return to pre-pandemic normalcy. Vaccines are one of our most important tools in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, and early indicators show us that that these vaccines are effective at preventing illness, severe disease and death.

However, for those who receive the vaccine, experts say it's not time to relax pandemic protocols. Don't ditch the face masks just yet.

Stephen Hippler, M.D. is the chief clinical officer for Peoria, Illinois-based OSF HealthCare. He says more research is needed to see if vaccinated people can still become infected without symptoms, allowing them to spread the virus to others who have not been vaccinated yet.

"Even though it sounds logical and reasonable that a vaccine should prevent you from being a carrier and passing it on, until we have proof, I think we should really be safe and smart and continue to wear masks."

This is why the Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC) still recommend that people wear masks and avoid close contact with others post-vaccination.

Experts need to understand more about the protection that COVID-19 vaccines provide in real-world conditions before making that decision.

"There will be research done on this and we will know one way or another in the future, but for now it really is safer, better and smarter that, even if you are vaccinated, to be very careful and protect others around you by wearing a mask," says Dr. Hippler.

He adds that the additional benefit we have seen this year from masking is the unprecedented decrease in the incidence of Influenza and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), so masking seems to have a benefit for other respiratory-transmitted viruses.

All the more reason, he says, to not become complacent with masking, physical distancing and hand washing after receiving a COVID vaccine.

"The other part of this whole pandemic is that it has been about protecting ourselves, but really the bigger issue has been how we protect others. How do we protect our society? How do we protect the most vulnerable? And really that's where I see masks playing a critical role is in protecting those around us who may be more susceptible, whether we've had a vaccine or not."

Currently, demand for vaccines against the virus that causes COVID-19 far outweighs the supply. And while public health agencies and health systems like OSF HealthCare are doing everything possible to make vaccines available in their communities, they face an enormous task in accomplishing this goal.

It is expected that most Americans will have the opportunity to get vaccinated this year, but many will have to wait weeks or months for that chance.

Until then, Dr. Hippler and others urge everyone to be patient and continue following public health guidelines to [slow the spread of COVID-19](#) whether or not you have received a vaccine: wear a mask, practice hand washing, avoid large crowds and maintain physical distance for a while longer.