It's Official: We Can Pretty Much Treat Covid Like the Flu Now. Here's a Guide.

New guidelines from the CDC Friday bring Covid precautions in line with those of other respiratory viruses

You should now follow the same precautions with Covid as you take with the flu, according to new guidelines from the CDC. That means staying home until you've gone a day with no fever and symptoms start to improve. Take other precautions for the next five days, including wearing a mask and limiting close contact with others.

Those are the same steps the CDC recommends for other respiratory viruses.

"Covid-19 is still an important public health threat, but it is not the emergency that it once was," said Dr. Brendan Jackson, who leads the respiratory virus response for the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Disease, on Friday.

"And its health impacts increasingly resemble those of other [respiratory viral] illnesses, including influenza and RSV."

Plenty of Americans dropped Covid testing and isolation periods long ago as the virus became more routine. Many schools and workplaces hadn't been enforcing the stricter CDC guidance, and some states have already relaxed their Covid guidance.

Many doctors say that at this point, common sense should guide you. If you feel sick, stay home. When you're feeling well enough to go out but still have some symptoms, it's a good idea to wear a mask indoors to protect others. Be more cautious if you're going to be around more vulnerable people, such as those who are immunocompromised or elderly.

Even if you're not worried about health risks, there's still the disruption of getting sick. So if you have a big trip coming up, an important job deadline looming or you just don't want to juggle work and a sniffily kid, adjust your

precautions to fit your tolerance level.

Just like the flu?

Covid-19 hospitalization and death numbers are still higher than those of the flu, but the gap has narrowed since earlier in the pandemic.

However, public health officials cautioned that Covid still isn't the same as the flu or other respiratory viruses. "Let's be clear. Covid-19 is not the flu," said Jackson at the CDC. "It still causes more serious illness and leads to more lasting effects," he said.

Public-health experts and physicians note that Covid is still a disease that is cited as a cause of death in [more than 1,000 people a week](), according to CDC data. And [long Covid](), with symptoms that can linger months and even years, hasn't gone away.

The CDC's relaxed Covid guidelines don't apply to healthcare settings, including nursing homes. People who are at higher risk for severe illness, such as the elderly, the immunocompromised, and pregnant women, should see a healthcare professional if they feel sick to get tested and potentially treated.

Many doctors say that at this point, common sense should guide you: If you feel sick, stay home. Photo: ISTOCK

What your symptoms mean

The CDC's latest guidance underscores that you're most contagious early in your illness.

"We want folks to recognize that the majority of virus spread is happening when you're sickest and as the days go on less virus spreads," said CDC Director Dr. Mandy Cohen.

However, assessing your symptoms isn't a foolproof way to tell how contagious you are.

In general, asymptomatic people are less likely to spread the virus, but it is possible to spread it without having

symptoms, says Deepta Bhattacharya, a professor of immunobiology at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson.

When you are coughing and sneezing a lot, you tend to be more infectious, because you are emitting lots of viral particles into the air. But you can still spread it simply by breathing, without coughing or sneezing.

Covid in general doesn't usually cause a lot of fever, says Dr. Julie Parsonnet, a professor of medicine and infectious-disease doctor at Stanford. So the absence of fever isn't a dependable sign that you are Covid-free, or that you aren't contagious.

At-home [rapid tests aren't always reliable](), either. So if you test negative but you still have symptoms, you should test again in a few days.

The bottom line, says Parsonnet, is that you should try to protect your family, friends and colleagues when you are sick, no matter what you have. Stay home if you feel ill. If you have a runny nose and cough, test yourself and wear a mask, she says.

When to go out

Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious-disease specialist at the University of California, San Francisco, says it is reasonable to follow more relaxed isolation guidelines.

Now that so many of us have been infected and reinfected, and gotten vaccinated at least once, our immune defenses against the virus are stronger, he notes. And we have more tools to fight it if we do get sick, including anti-viral medications.

How often to vaccinate

Most people should get a Covid vaccine once a year, likely in the fall around the same time as you get your flu shot, to bolster your immune defenses for the winter when cases rise.

Older people should get vaccinated more often. [The CDC this week urged people](#) 65 years and older to get a spring booster at least four months after their last dose. About 60% of seniors aren't up-to-date on their Covid shots.

People with compromised immune systems should be allowed to get a Covid shot whenever their doctors advise, spaced two months apart, the CDC recommends.

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Navigating Covid's Resurgence

Latest news and guidelines as the virus mutates, selected by editors