

# CDC's Big Mask Change Went From Science to Secret to Surprise

[Josh Wingrove](#) May 15, 2021, 1:00 AM HST

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For a nation mired in a pandemic for more than a year, the biggest step toward a return to normal came suddenly, even to President Joe Biden.

After warning the country on Monday to stay vigilant amid the threat of coronavirus variants, the president found himself three days later striking a different tone, celebrating that the U.S. had already reached a sort of finish line.

Late Wednesday evening, Biden's White House learned from Rochelle Walensky, head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that vaccinated Americans could safely shed the face masks that have become a staple of their wardrobes in almost all occasions.

That decision -- the most momentous yet in the nation's battle against Covid-19 -- was kept under wraps among a small circle of top White House aides that night as they began making arrangements for the president to address the watershed moment the following day.

Thursday's announcement not only turned the page on painful social restrictions brought on by the pandemic, but also eased tensions around public health directives that have sowed acrimony and division over the past year, largely because of resistance among Republicans.

"Free at last," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said after the CDC lifted its masking guidance.

But the decision also sparked confusion, as businesses weighed whether to immediately scrap mask requirements even though they have no way of knowing whether their staff and customers are vaccinated.

While it appeared abrupt, the decision was the result of weeks of mounting evidence on the efficacy of coronavirus vaccines collected by the CDC. The agency has erred on the side of caution throughout the pandemic, drawing criticism for doing so even as the number of vaccinated Americans soared.

Just six weeks ago, Walensky warned of "impending doom" amid a rise in infections, hospitalizations and deaths. But then a string of research began streaming in, showing that public health experts' worst fears weren't materializing.

After making her decision on Wednesday, Walensky briefed Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra that afternoon before telling the White House around 9 p.m. She and other health officials held television appearances that night and gave no hint of the coming change.

## **'Spectacularly Effective' Vaccines**

The White House has said it was Walensky's decision, made "not by us, not by the White House, not by the president, to be very clear," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Friday. "Even here, only a small number of people knew" ahead of the announcement, she said.

Biden's remarks Thursday afternoon were a late addition to his public schedule issued the night before.

Walensky understood she'd be criticized regardless, one official familiar with her thinking said -- some would say she moved too fast while others would say she moved too slow. She viewed her job as weighing the science and then deciding, the official said.

"The CDC is a science-based organization. They accumulate data and they make decisions based on the data," Anthony Fauci told MSNBC on Friday. "As more and more data come in, it becomes clear how spectacularly effective these vaccines are."

After the CDC announced the change on Thursday, White House staff immediately began removing their own masks, even before Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris held a maskless press event in the Rose Garden that afternoon.

Following the event, an aide announced over the White House press area's loudspeaker: "Enjoy your maskless lives."

## Research Advancements

On Thursday, Walensky cited research -- from as early as March 29 and as recently as May 6 -- showing good news in three main areas. First, the real-world effectiveness of vaccines was holding up, showing that their protections weren't lower outside of a clinical trial setting.

Secondly, [Pfizer Inc.](#)'s vaccine was found to offer protection against two variants of the virus, a strong sign that mutations wouldn't substantially circumvent the protection.

Finally, one study showed lower viral loads in cases where vaccinated people did get sick, and another showed no secondary transmission among vaccinated people who contracted Covid-19. Those results allayed fears

among health officials who had worried that vaccinated people could still spread the virus.

Another study, released Friday, found that the Pfizer and Moderna Inc. vaccines were 94% effective at stopping symptomatic cases in healthcare workers. Walensky called that research pivotal to her decision.

Armed with that knowledge -- along with data showing a drop in cases and a surge of vaccinations and vaccine supply -- Walensky made her biggest call yet as CDC director: Telling vaccinated Americans that they can set aside their masks in gatherings small or large, indoors or out.

"I am cautiously optimistic that we're seeing this great, great endpoint in sight, but I think we really do have to be humble and say that this virus, this pandemic has given us twists and turns so we can't get our eye off the ball," Walensky told NBC in an interview on Friday.

## **'Get Vaccinated'**

Walensky served as chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital before being tapped by Biden for the CDC role, which doesn't require Senate confirmation. That thrust her immediately into the public eye, while other top officials, including Becerra and Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, faced weeks-long delays in confirmation.

Walensky's announcement on Thursday set off a cascade of revisions to other CDC guidance -- ranging from transportation to education -- and raises questions for businesses, churches and other organizations about how quickly to return to normal, what safety measures to have in place, and how to know who's vaccinated. It also dangled the promise of a return to normal for people who have been hesitant to get the vaccine.

"The rule is very simple: Get vaccinated or wear a mask until you do," Biden said Thursday.

Health officials including Fauci and Biden's Covid adviser Andy Slavitt have said the announcement wasn't specifically intended as an inducement to get vaccinated.

"People may interpret it that way, but I don't think that's what drove the CDC," Slavitt told Bloomberg Television on Friday. "What that will cause people to do hopefully, who haven't been vaccinated, is to understand the vaccinations work."

With roughly 54% of U.S. adults not fully vaccinated and children below the age of 12 still not eligible for shots, risks of another outbreak among at least some Americans remain.

"Ultimately, we know that this virus is an opportunist, and where there are low rates of vaccination, it will emerge again," Walensky told NBC on Friday. But, she said, "we needed to take this first step."

— *With assistance by Jennifer Jacobs, Erik Wasson, Elaine Chen, and Justin Sink*

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