



Plain Language Edition

What do the CDC's new COVID-19 Community Levels mean for me?

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What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a bad disease. It makes people very sick. COVID-19 has spread around the world. COVID-19 is still spreading. You can learn more about COVID-19 by reading [our fact sheet on the COVID-19 vaccine](#).

Why do hospitals fill up during COVID-19?

If you get very sick with COVID-19, you should go to the hospital. Hospitals can run out of space. If many people have COVID-19, the hospital can get full. Then, there is no space for more people with COVID-19. There is no space for people who are sick with something else. This is a problem!

Some people with COVID-19 need a ventilator. A **ventilator** is a machine that helps you breathe. Hospitals can run out of ventilators. Then, they can't help any more people who need ventilators. When hospitals fill up because of COVID-19, people don't get the help they need.

What is community transmission?

The **CDC** is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC is a part of the government. They tell people what to do to stay safe from COVID-19.

The CDC measures **community transmission** of COVID-19. Community transmission means how many cases of COVID-19 there are in a place. If community transmission is high in your area, that means you have a high risk of catching COVID-19.

The CDC says that community transmission is high when 1 or more out of every thousand people in a place has COVID-19. 1 out of every thousand people might not sound like a lot. But remember, COVID-19 spreads very fast. If one out of every thousand people in a place has a bad disease like COVID-19, that is bad news.

What are COVID-19 Community Levels?

The CDC used to talk about how many COVID-19 cases a place had. They used those numbers to tell people how to stay safe.

For example, let's say a place had a lot of COVID-19 cases. The CDC used to say that people in that place should wear masks inside.

In February 2022, the CDC started using a new way to talk about risk from COVID-19. They made a new tool called **COVID-19 Community Levels**.

Your COVID-19 Community Level can be:

- Low.
- Medium.
- High.

The CDC decides each county's COVID-19 Community Level based on:

- How many COVID-19 cases there are in the county
- Whether the hospitals in the county are crowded with sick people who have COVID-19.

In the COVID-19 Community Levels tool, a county can have up to 2 COVID-19 cases out of every thousand people and still be "Low." This is different from the risk of getting COVID-19. If a place has 1 or more COVID-19 cases out of every thousand people, the risk of getting COVID-19 is high.

A low COVID-19 Community Level means that:

- Less than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19, AND
- The hospitals in your county are not crowded with people who have COVID-19.

A medium COVID-19 Community Level can mean 2 things.

Medium can mean that:

- Less than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19, BUT
- The hospitals in your county are crowded with people who have COVID-19.

OR medium can mean that:

- More than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19, BUT
- The hospitals in your county are not crowded with people who have COVID-19.

A high COVID-19 Community Level means that:

- More than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19, AND
- The hospitals in your county are crowded with people who have COVID-19.

	Hospitals are not crowded	Hospitals are crowded
Less than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19	Low	Medium
More than 2 out of every thousand people have COVID-19	Medium	High

COVID-19 Community Levels are mostly about whether or not hospitals are crowded. The CDC uses COVID-19 Community Levels to tell people what they should do.

For example, the CDC says to wear a mask inside if your county's COVID-19 Community Level is high.

If my county's Community Level is low or medium, am I safe from COVID-19?

Your county's COVID-19 Community Level does not tell you much about your risk of catching COVID-19. Even in places with low COVID-19 Community Levels, people still get sick with COVID-19. You can still catch COVID-19 even if your county's COVID-19 Community Level is low or medium. Remember, "high" and "low" mean different things for your risk of getting COVID-19 than for COVID-19 Community Levels. A place can have a low COVID-19 Community Level, but a high risk of catching COVID-19.

For example:

Normaltown has a lot of hospital beds. Many people in Normaltown have COVID-19. 1 out of every thousand people in Normaltown has COVID-19. If you are in Normaltown, your risk of getting COVID-19 is high.

Hospitals in Normaltown are not crowded. So Normaltown's Community Level is low. But there are still a lot of people with COVID-19!

Some places have a lot of hospital beds, but also have a lot of people sick with COVID-19. The CDC used to talk about how places like that have a high risk of COVID-19. Now, the CDC says that places like that have low COVID-19 Community Levels. The number of people with COVID-19 did not change. The risk did not change. The CDC just changed how they talk about those places.

Changing how we talk about COVID-19 does not make things safer. COVID-19 is still spreading. People are still getting COVID-19. People are still going to the hospital. People are still dying from COVID-19.

When should I wear a mask?

You still should wear a mask if you can.

We have to wear masks *before* the hospitals get full. Then, we can stop COVID-19 from spreading. If we stop COVID-19 from spreading, hospitals won't fill up. If we start wearing masks *after* the hospitals are full, that doesn't help as much. So you should still wear a mask if you can.

You should wear a mask when you're in public places, like a grocery store or bank. You should wear a mask on planes, buses or trains. Wearing a mask keeps you safer from COVID-19. You can learn more about masks by reading [our fact sheet on masks](#).

What else should I do to stay safe?

If you have not had your COVID-19 vaccines, you should get vaccinated. You can ask your doctor about getting vaccinated. You can also go to [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov). That is a website that will help you find a place to get vaccinated.

If you have not had your COVID-19 booster, you should get the booster. Learn more about boosters in [our factsheet on boosters](#).

And you should also continue doing the things you were doing before:

- Keep wearing a mask.
- Keep staying home if you can.
- Keep washing your hands.

Words to Know

CDC

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC is a part of the government. They tell people what to do to stay safe from COVID-19.

Community transmission

How many cases of COVID-19 there are in a place.

COVID-19 Community Levels

A way of measuring COVID-19 risk in a place. The CDC decides a county's COVID-19 Community Level based on how many COVID-19 cases there are in the county and whether the hospitals in the county are crowded with sick people who have COVID-19.

Ventilator

A machine that helps you breathe.

To Learn More

- CDC: Many healthy Americans can take a break from masks (AP News): <https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-health-centers-for-disease-control-and-prevention-87d7bdc811ba6521e32017072d5ea180>
- Know Your COVID-19 Community Level (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html>