

Malaysia: Loosened mask mandates: consider plight of high-risk groups

Tuesday 20 September 2022, by [CHAN Audrey](#), [DAENIE Izz](#) (Date first published: 19 September 2022).

On the 7th of September 2022, our Health Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin, announced that the use of face masks will no longer be mandatory in indoor settings effective immediately, except for in public transportation and medical facilities.

This is a decision that puts everyone at further risk of contracting COVID-19, but more so high-risk groups: disabled people, immunocompromised people, the elderly, and those with pre-existing conditions. An individual does not need to fall into any of these groups to understand the consequences of a high-risk person being exposed to COVID-19. The announcement stated that masking up by symptomatic, high-risk individuals, as well as those in close proximity with them was only highly encouraged instead of mandatory. This, once again, makes it a personal responsibility for individuals to protect vulnerable people from COVID-19 when it is the responsibility of the government to protect their citizens from this disease.

The government has not taken sufficient measures to properly address the spread of COVID-19 through airborne transmission — which is the most common method of transmission. The airborne particles of the virus hang in indoor air for up to hours after an infected person has been there (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). In this way, masks have been most effective indoors in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Yet, not only is the mask mandate being loosened, there have been no improvements on indoor ventilation to prevent airborne transmission.

Furthermore, although most of the population has been vaccinated and boosted, boosters are still not available in a consistent way, as many hospitals are currently not offering boosters anymore, and information on the availability of boosters remain inaccessible. This exacerbates the spread of various COVID-19 strains among us and increases the risk of reinfections which can have long-lasting effects that may permanently disable someone (Sidik, 2022).

A loose mask mandate that is not preceded by actions to significantly and wholly prevent the spread of COVID-19 is simply just a decision that forcibly limits the movement of high-risk individuals — particularly among spaces with unmasked or COVID-19-infected individuals. Better measures have to be taken. Improve indoor ventilation, improve access to boosters, subsidise the cost of necessary COVID-19 equipment such as masks and RTKs more heavily. Make masks mandatory indoors again, and take COVID-19 seriously.

It is an undeniable fact that looser restrictions — while we are still living in a pandemic — severely limits accessibility for high-risk individuals, including the individuals who are in frequent contact with them. For these people, the situation has not changed significantly from our very first lockdown in the early years of COVID-19 (Grant, 2022). We urge the government to take more serious measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Provide the protections we demand and amp up efforts to protect vulnerable communities or retract the loosened mask mandate. We understand that the

country is eager to move forward from this pandemic, but we can only do so when the most vulnerable of our communities are protected.

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