Frequently Asked Questions for San Francisco's Safer Return Together Health Order

July 9, 2021

This Tip Sheet was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) for local use. It will be posted at sfdph.org/healthorders.

AUDIENCE: The general public living and working in San Francisco and their employers.

PURPOSE: To help the public and employers understand what health and safety practices are still needed to prevent spread of COVID-19.

BACKGROUND: On June 15, 2021, the California Blueprint for a Safer Economy was terminated, however statewide COVID-19 guidance continues for some settings. The San Francisco Health Officer’s declaration of a health emergency arising from the pandemic continues to be in effect, and the main health order governing the emergency remains in place. This document answers FAQs about the current version of the health order.

Background

1) What does the Safer Return Together Health Order do?

This order lifts most pandemic requirements. More specifically, it lifts capacity limits and physical distancing requirements for most businesses and activities. It also allows businesses, schools, and other activities to fully resume.

The order still has some requirements to specific situations. The purpose of these restrictions is to protect our communities and save lives by:

- Increasing vaccine coverage to the greatest extent possible
- Limiting the transmission risk of COVID-19
- Containing any potential COVID-19 outbreaks
- Aligning in general with the guidance issued by the CDC and the State relating to COVID-19 except in limited instances where local conditions require more restrictive measures

The order applies these additional measures to certain settings with vulnerable populations or where there is a high risk of COVID-19 transmission to ensure the health and safety of all in that setting.

Vaccination

2) Who should get vaccinated?

Every eligible individual living, working and visiting San Francisco is strongly urged to get vaccinated as soon as they are able. This is especially important for people at risk for severe illness with COVID-19 and people who live or work with unvaccinated older adults and unvaccinated individuals with health risks.

3) Which workers must get vaccinated?

Anyone who works in a high risk-setting is required to be fully vaccinated by September 15, 2021. The health order also does not prohibit any other businesses or government entities from requiring their employees to get vaccinated or provide verification of their vaccination status.
4) Are any employees exempt from this vaccination requirement?
There are limited exemptions to vaccination requirements such as religious beliefs and qualifying medical reasons. In order to claim an exemption, employees must submit a declination form to their employer. Unvaccinated exempt people who work in high risk settings will be required to wear a well-fitted mask (except while actively eating or drinking). Alternatively, non-vented N95 mask, supplied by the high-risk setting upon request, is strongly encouraged. They must also get tested for COVID-19 at least once a week using either a nucleic acid or an antigen test.

High Risk Settings

5) What are high-risk settings?
The health order defines high risk settings as: acute care hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, residential care facilities for the elderly, homeless shelters (general shelters, family shelters, transitional age youth shelters, and domestic violence shelters), and jails.
These are care or living settings where many people often are living together. These are often congregate settings, where vulnerable populations reside out of necessity and where the risk of COVID-19 transmission and severe illness or death is high.

6) What steps must be taken at a worksite that is designated a high-risk setting?
By September 15, 2021, employers at high risk settings must:
• Find out the vaccination status of all personnel (i.e., staff, contractors, sub-contractors, vendors, volunteers)
• Require vaccination for all personnel (except for the exceptions given above)
• Require unvaccinated exempt personnel to wear a well-fitted mask at all times
• Require unvaccinated exempt personnel to be tested at least once per week

Masking

7) Can I take off my mask at work if I am unvaccinated?
Masking in most workplaces is set by rules from Cal/OSHA. Consult those rules and your employer for details about the masking requirements in your workplace.

8) Do I have to wear a mask at work if I am fully vaccinated?
Fully vaccinated employees are not required to wear facial coverings at work, but there are exceptions. A business or government entity can require that their employees wear facial coverings.

9) Are there places where I am required to wear a mask regardless of my vaccination status?
Masks continue to be required for everyone in the following situations: public transit, indoors in K-12 schools and other youth settings, health care (including long-term care settings), correctional and detention facilities, homeless shelters, emergency shelters and cooling centers.

10) Can a business or government office require employees and customers to wear masks?
Businesses or government offices may continue to require masks for all customers and visitors to reduce the risk to their workers and others. They should clearly post the business’ or office’s requirements onsite and online and apply them consistently.
Everyone should be respectful of an individual’s decision to wear a mask even in settings where they are not required, even if a person is fully vaccinated. No business or person should take an adverse action against individuals who choose to wear a mask to protect their health.

11) As a fully vaccinated person I am not required to mask in many places. Should I carry a mask with me anyways?
If you are certain that you will always stay outside, you do not need to bring a mask. If there is a chance you will go indoors, or need to hop on public transit, bring a mask. Many businesses may require a mask to receive service. It is sensible to always have a mask at the ready.

12) Can my business ask its unmasked customers about their vaccination status?
A business can ask, but customers may not be able or willing to verify their vaccination status. You should assume that there could be unvaccinated customers among unmasked customers and take appropriate measures (e.g., encourage and support staff vaccination, signage to remind customers that unvaccinated people should wear masks) to protect yourself, your employees, and customers.

Other Considerations in the Workplace

13) Is personal health screening still required in the workplace?
Businesses and government offices must continue screening employees for COVID-19 symptoms. This does not require that the screening be performed on-site. You can ask your employees to evaluate their symptoms before arriving at work.

14) Should my business continue to offer outdoor and pick-up / to-go service?
All businesses and governmental entities are urged to continue to offer services and activities outdoors, if it is feasible and legally allowed. COVID-19 transmission risk is much lower outdoors compared to indoors.

15) Does the Safer Return Together Health Order mandate any signage?
All businesses and governmental entities are required to post signage that is easily visible reminding individuals of COVID-19 prevention best practices to reduce transmission, including messages with information about topics such as:

- Get vaccinated
- Stay home if you’re sick and talk to your doctor
- Wear a mask for added protection
- Maximize fresh air
- Clean your hands

All businesses and governmental entities are required to post signs in employee break rooms or other areas encouraging employees to get vaccinated and informing them how to obtain additional information. These signs are available online at sf.gov/resource/2021/covid-19-outreach-toolkit.

16) Are there special requirements for schools and programs for children and youth?
Yes. There are separate directives covering Schools and Programs for Children and Youth.
Resources

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) Health Directives (SFDPH)
- Core Guidance for COVID-19 (SFDPH)
- Order of The Health Officer No. C19-07y: Order of the Health Officer of the City and County of San Francisco Encouraging COVID-19 Vaccine Coverage and Reducing Disease Risks (Safer Return Together)
- Find All Guidance (California Department of Public Health)
  - [www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Guidance.aspx](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Guidance.aspx)
- Revisions to the COVID-19 Prevention Emergency Temporary Standards Frequently Asked Questions (California Department of Industrial Relations)
  - [www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/coronavirus/Revisions-FAQ.html](http://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/coronavirus/Revisions-FAQ.html)