

**Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19):  
Guidance for People at Higher Risk for Severe COVID-19**

Older adults (over 65) and people with certain medical conditions are at higher risk for developing severe COVID-19. Severe COVID-19 is when a person is sick enough that they need to be admitted to the hospital. They may need care in an intensive care unit, require mechanical ventilation to help them breathe, or may even die. This guidance provides steps to take to protect yourself from COVID-19. For additional information, visit [coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance](https://coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance).

**Vaccination:**

- **Get vaccinated!** The COVID-19 vaccine is easily available, safe, effective, and free. Currently, all people in the United States age 12 and older are eligible for COVID-19 vaccination. Vaccination is the single most important tool we have for ending the COVID-19 pandemic. It is especially important for older adults and people with medical conditions that put them at higher risk for severe COVID-19 to get vaccinated if they have not already done so. Children should get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible. Also **get your COVID-19 booster shot or additional shot** as recommended. For more information, see [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/booster-shot.html](https://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/booster-shot.html).
- COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective even against the circulating variants of the virus that causes COVID-19, including the Delta variant. However, no vaccines are 100% effective and there are breakthrough cases of COVID-19 even in fully vaccinated people. Fortunately, if you catch COVID-19 when you are fully vaccinated, it is more likely to be a mild case. The vaccines are very effective at preventing severe illness, hospitalization, and death. At this point, most people who become very sick with COVID-19 are unvaccinated people.
- A person is considered **fully vaccinated** 14 days after they complete a **primary** COVID-19 vaccine series (after the second dose of a 2-dose series, or after one dose of a single-dose vaccine). The **primary series** is the standard vaccine course before any extra (i.e., “booster”) doses.
- **Note:** People who are immunocompromised<sup>1</sup> may not be fully protected even when they are fully vaccinated. They should continue to take all precautions recommended for unvaccinated people and are encouraged to discuss further with their healthcare provider for personalized advice.
- For more information see *Guidance for the Public (Not Vaccinated) and Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People* [coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance](https://coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance).
- Find out more about the COVID-19 vaccine at [coronavirus.dc.gov/vaccine](https://coronavirus.dc.gov/vaccine).

**Groups at higher risk for severe COVID-19:**

**Adults over 65**

- About 80% of people who have died from COVID-19 in the US have been people over 65.
- The older a person is, the higher their risk of severe COVID-19.

**High risk health conditions**

- The following conditions are associated with increased risk for severe COVID-19. The more of the listed conditions a person has, the higher their risk.
- **In adults and children:**
  - Chronic liver disease (especially cirrhosis)

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<sup>1</sup> **Immunocompromised** means having a weakened immune system due to a medical condition or from taking medications that suppress the immune system. This includes, but is not limited to: people on chemotherapy, people with blood cancers like leukemia, people who have had an organ transplant or stem cell transplant, and people on dialysis.

- Chronic lung disease (including COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), asthma (moderate-to-severe), interstitial lung disease, cystic fibrosis, bronchiectasis, pulmonary hypertension, and pulmonary embolism)
- Diabetes (Type 1 and Type 2)
- Heart conditions (such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathies, and congenital heart disease)
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system)
- Obesity
- Sickle cell disease
- **In adults:**
  - Cancer
  - Chronic kidney disease
  - Dementia or other neurological conditions
  - Down Syndrome
  - HIV infection
  - Mental health conditions (including schizophrenia and depression)
  - Overweight
  - Pregnancy, or recent pregnancy (within 42 days following end of pregnancy)
  - Smoking, current or former
  - History of solid organ transplant or stem cell transplant
  - History of stroke or cerebrovascular disease
  - Substance use disorders
  - Thalassemia
  - Tuberculosis
- **In children:**
  - Genetic conditions
  - Metabolic conditions

**Social life and everyday prevention measures:**

- People at higher risk of severe COVID-19 infection and the people who live with them should continue to choose their activities wisely and take measures to be as safe as possible.
- **Outdoor activities are safer than indoor activities.**
- **Avoid:**
  - **crowded indoor and outdoor settings.** Choose activities that take place outside with plenty of space for people to maintain 6 feet of social distancing.
  - **activities and gatherings in poorly ventilated indoor spaces.** In indoor settings, improve ventilation by opening doors and windows as much as possible.
- **Stay home if you are sick**, if you have tested positive for COVID-19, or need to quarantine due to exposure to someone with COVID-19 or because of travel.
- **Avoid** being around people who are sick.
- **Wear a mask:**
  - Masks protect the wearer and protect other people.
  - Masks are most effective if they fit snugly to the face and have 2-3 layers of tightly woven fabric.
  - **Indoors:**
    - **DC has an indoor mask mandate for all people in public settings regardless of their vaccination status. This policy took effect July 31, 2021.**
      - The indoor mask mandate does not extend to indoor gatherings at private residences.
      - People who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks during indoor private gatherings that include people from outside their

household.

- **Outdoors:**
  - **In general, people do not need to wear masks during outdoor activities.** However, particularly in areas of substantial to high transmission<sup>2</sup> CDC recommends that people who are not fully vaccinated or who are immunocompromised wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings or during activities that involve sustained close contact with other people who are not fully vaccinated.
  - Keep a mask handy during outdoor activities to put on in case the setting becomes crowded or people from outside one's household come near.
  - Fully vaccinated people may also choose to wear a mask in crowded outdoor settings if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised.
- Children age 2 and younger should not wear masks.
- For more information see *Mask Guidance for the General Public* at [coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance](https://coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance).
- **Social distancing:** People who are not fully vaccinated (including children younger than 12) or who are immunocompromised should maintain at least 6 feet of distance in any setting from people who are not part of their household.
  - Wearing a mask does not replace the need for social distancing.
- **Avoid** physical contact with people not from your household (e.g., don't shake hands or hug, use non-contact ways to greet others like waving and saying "hello").
- **Perform frequent hand hygiene** (with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer).

### More tips for staying healthy

- Stay physically active and practice healthy habits to help you cope with stress.
- Keep up with your routine health care appointments and other vaccines such as the influenza (flu) and pneumococcal vaccines.
  - People at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19 are generally the same people at high risk for severe illness from flu.
  - COVID-19 and flu share many of the same symptoms, making it hard to tell the difference based on symptoms alone.
  - For more information about the similarities and differences between COVID-19 and influenza see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: [cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm](https://cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm)
- Call your healthcare provider if you have concerns about your medical conditions or if you get sick and think that you may have COVID-19. If you need emergency help, call 911.

These recommendations will continue to be updated as necessary. Please visit [coronavirus.dc.gov](https://coronavirus.dc.gov) for the most updated information.

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<sup>2</sup> For information on DC's current level of community transmission, see the *CDC Data Tracker* at [covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view](https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view)