

Biden's Press Secretary Says Social Distancing and Masks Will Be 'Essential' Even After Vaccination

"We'll need to continue communicating about that," said Jen Psaki.



(Jim LoScalzo/CNP / Polaris/Newscom)

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters at a briefing on Thursday that the president expects the public to continue to practice the full gamut of mitigation measures—masks, social distancing, etc.—even after they receive the vaccine.

"Obviously, [the vaccine] is an incredible medical breakthrough and we want every American to have one. But even after you're vaccinated, social distancing and wearing masks are going to be essential, and we'll need to continue communicating about that."

This is a demoralizing and excessively cautious point to keep emphasizing. It's critical to vaccinate as many people as possible, and the government should be doing everything it can to encourage vaccination while making the process easier. Preparing people for disappointment seems like a bad approach. After all, young folks don't have nearly as much to fear from COVID-19 as older Americans; for this former group, one of the major selling points of vaccination is the prospect of returning to normal life. Some might decide that their extremely low odds of negative health consequences from COVID-19 coupled with the unpleasant potential side effects of the vaccine means they should hold off on getting it if they will still have to practice aggressive social distancing anyway.

While certain precautions will still be necessary in large public settings until widespread vaccination has brought the pandemic under control, health officials are at risk of criminally underselling the miracle of the vaccines, which appear to reduce life-threatening COVID-19 cases to nearly zero. It's true we can't say for certain that vaccinated people are incapable of spreading COVID-19 to non-vaccinated people even if they are no longer susceptible to the disease themselves, but scientists have good reason to expect that the vaccines will also reduce transmission. An early study of the forthcoming AstraZeneca vaccine found promising evidence of a substantial reduction in transmission by as much as two-thirds.

There will still be some risks, though these risks should dramatically shrink over time as a majority of the population becomes vaccinated and herd immunity kicks in. In any case, we don't need to wait until that day to wean ourselves off the harshest social distancing measures. People who have been vaccinated for the requisite time period can mingle once again. They can have parties and go to restaurants. They can hug and kiss their vaccinated grandparents.

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Source:

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