Covid-19 update- States where Covid-19 mask not mandatory anymore. What experts have to say

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When the Covid-19 pandemic began over two years ago, wearing the mask was our first line of defence against the deadly virus. But two years on, as India witnesses a steep decline in Covid-19 cases, several states have now announced that the Covid-19 masks are no longer mandatory. States where Covid-19 masks are no longer mandatory:

Despite a sudden surge in global Covid-19 cases, in India the cases have been on a steady declining trend with the states of Maharashtra, Delhi, Telangana, West Bengal announcing complete relaxation of the Covid-19 norms starting from April. What this means is that while all pandemic curbs now stand withdrawn, whether to wear a mask or not is debatable as Maharashtra and Delhi have done away with the penalty for not wearing the mask in public places.

It is interesting to note that Maharashtra has withdrawn its mandatory mask rule starting from April 2. However, if anyone wants to wear one, they can continue to wear it, the state Health Minister Rajesh Tope has said.

Additionally, wearing Covid-19 mask is not mandatory in Delhi and Telangana. The Delhi Disaster Management Authority has announced its decision that there will be no fine for not wearing a mask. Earlier in Delhi, the fine was ₹500. Likewise, Telangana has also withdrawn its mask mandate.

Meanwhile, the state of West Bengal has relaxed Covid-19 restrictions but masks will continue to stay. The Bengal government has lifted all restrictions imposed because of the pandemic.

What the experts have to say?

Interestingly, the experts are divided over whether it is the right time to do away with the Covid-19 mask. As the DDMA on Thursday decided to do away with fines for not wearing face masks at public places amid drop in coronavirus cases in the city, many doctors said the "move was not wise" and should have been done in a "phased manner," as per news agency PTI report.

They also cautioned that vulnerable people should continue to follow all Covid-appropriate behaviours. Doctors at leading hospitals in Delhi concurred that while the number of cases has significantly declined, "Covid is not out of the world yet."

Dr Suranjit Chatterjee, a senior consultant at Apollo hospital said, "while it has been observed that many people have already stopped wearing masks, amid a fall in Covid cases, I would say it should have been done in a gradual manner."

"Mask mandates should have remained in crowded public places like malls, markets, theatres etc. People are already fatigued, and not having a fine for not wearing a mask would mean many will not wear it, which is not a good thing as Covid is still not out of this world," he said.

The senior doctor, who has been on Covid duty since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 and a Covid survivor himself, sounded a note of caution for the vulnerable sections and the elderly,

saying, "These people at least must continue to wear masks and adhere to all Covid safety norms," as per news agency PTI report.

Meanwhile, Dr Richa Sareen, consultant of pulmonology at Fortis hospital, also noted Chatterjee's views, saying the vulnerable sections like those having co-morbidities or other ailments that might affect the lungs etc, and those who have been infected in the past and survived with difficulty must continue to wear masks and follow all Covid-appropriate behaviours.

"Yes, it's been two years since the pandemic broke out, and people are tired and fatigued of wearing masks and other things that Covid has brought in, but the move by the government to do away with fine for not wearing face masks at public places was not a wise one as there is a threat of a fourth wave, I would say. People should take it with a pinch of salt," she added.

This comes at a time when Omicron BA.2 has emerged as a fresh concern across the world with major cities of China forced to embrace quarantine once again.

(With inputs from agencies)