

# Decision to abolish face mask mandate next week

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*Hoe said although the government is likely to lift the requirement for face masks, those who still want to wear it may continue to do so. – ADIB RAWI YAHYA/THESUN*

**PETALING JAYA:** Health Ministry officials have confirmed that its minister Khairy Jamaluddin will announce next week if the face mask mandate will be withdrawn, but the matter is being explored further, especially for enclosed spaces, said Universiti Malaya head of social and preventive medicine Dr Victor Hoe.

He was commenting on a statement by the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) on Wednesday urging the government to review its policy on the mandatory wearing of face masks in enclosed spaces.

“It is time that we seriously consider doing away with wearing face masks in enclosed spaces, the only caveat being certain types of public transport where people are crammed together for a long duration, in nursing homes, old folk homes and healthcare facilities,” said MMA president Dr Koh Kar Chai.

He also said the country had reached a “plateau of sorts” as the number of new Covid-19 cases and the number of hospitalisations due to the virus were not high.

The face mask mandate was initiated on Aug 1, 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

On Tuesday, National Recovery Council chairman Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said a decision on whether to abolish the use of face masks in enclosed spaces would be looked into and decided by the Health Ministry.

He said Deputy Health Minister Dr Noor Azmi Ghazali stated that the ministry would closely study the matter.

“This is not just because Singapore did it, and so we have to do it as well,” he told a media conference.

Hoe said there is no zero-risk situation in managing Covid-19 infections or any other diseases.

“We need a balance between risk and benefits. The reason for the government exploring the removal of the face mask mandate is for us to slowly transition back to our normal practices.

“The number of cases is coming down and the number of people who get severe infections, need hospitalisation or die from Covid-19 is also low.”

Hoe said the risk of death from Covid-19 is approaching the level of influenza infection.

“We have already removed the mandate in eateries and restaurants a few months back. So, the move by the government to further ease the mask mandate is expected.

“People must understand that although the government will remove the mandate, those who still want to wear face masks can continue to do so. Those with respiratory infections or symptoms should also be responsible and put on their face masks when they are in public areas.”

Hoe said generally, the benefit of removing face masks is that it makes breathing easier, allows better communication since the voice comes out more clearly and for people with hearing difficulties, it enhances the communication process.

Dr Muhamad Afiq Aziz from Universiti Malaya Institute of Biological Sciences said wearing face masks alone is not sufficient to reduce Covid-19 transmissions.

He said vaccination is one of the main ways to provide adequate protection against the virus.

“The vast majority of us have been fully vaccinated and boosted. The risk of contracting the virus is low, but extra precautions, such as hand washing and good coughing etiquette, should also be taken.

“Mask use has resulted in pollution caused by the inappropriate disposal of masks. This is harmful to the environment. Human and environmental health are two critical issues that must be addressed.”