



# Arkansas Department of Health

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Governor Asa Hutchinson  
José R. Romero, MD, Secretary of Health

Effective Date: May 4, 2020 Phase 1 Reopening Places of Worship  
Updated: July 2, 2020 Phase 2 considerations  
Updated: Nov. 10, 2020 Increased emphasis on congregational masking while singing  
Updated: March 19, 2021  
Updated June 24, 2021 following CDC Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People

## Guidance for Places of Worship

The State of Arkansas respects the separate and unique role of the church and does not have mandates or directives for houses of worship. This document reflects guidance and no directives. Community spread of COVID-19 remains active within Arkansas. Therefore, the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) makes the following recommendations for the prevention of transmission of COVID-19 in places of worship. **This Guidance was updated on June 24, 2021 to reflect new advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding decreased masking requirements for fully vaccinated people.**

Here are links to ADH's updated guidance on Face Coverings and Physical Distancing and the CDC's updated guidance for fully vaccinated people:

[https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/images/uploads/pdf/Face\\_Covering\\_GuidanceFINAL5.21.21.pdf](https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/images/uploads/pdf/Face_Covering_GuidanceFINAL5.21.21.pdf)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html>

**Places of worship are public settings where people who are fully vaccinated and those who are not yet fully vaccinated are likely to mix. Many congregants may be older or have underlying health conditions. Further, individuals commonly engage in singing, an activity that is known to increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19 (if carried out unmasked). Therefore, some places of worship may choose to continue to require that all congregants wear masks for the protection of all who attend.**

- Houses of worship are strongly encouraged to continue to offer online platforms for participation in worship because it may not yet be advisable/feasible for all congregants to attend in-person services
- Post signs at all building entrances advising congregants not to enter if
  - They have had a fever of 100.4°F or higher in the past 2 days

- They have cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, new loss of taste or smell or other symptoms typical of COVID-19
- They have had known exposure to someone with COVID-19 in the past 14 days and they themselves are not yet fully vaccinated
- Post signs at all building entrances advising congregants that they may wish to refrain from entering if they are 65 or more years old or have underlying health conditions including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, severe obesity, asthma or weakened immunity and are not yet fully vaccinated against COVID-19, because they are at higher risk for severe illness if infected.
- Post signs at all building entrances to inform that facial coverings and physical distancing of 6 (six) feet are strongly recommended for those who are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19.
- Note that the only exceptions to the wearing of face coverings should be:
  - Fully vaccinated persons
  - Faith leaders, only while addressing the congregation
  - Performing singers (choir, worship team or praise team members), only while singing
    - The above individuals should stand at twelve (12) feet distance from each other and from others while speaking or singing without a face covering unless they are fully vaccinated
  - All congregants who participate in Holy Communion, only while actually consuming the Elements
  - CDC guidelines state that masks should not be placed on children younger than 2 years old.
- **Notes on recommended face coverings:** ADH recommends multi-layered cloth masks or medical masks (but not medical N95 masks). Cloth masks with a sewn-in clear plastic window or clear plastic masks that seal around nose and chin are acceptable. Masks with valves, single-layer bandanas and single-layer gaiters are not acceptable as face coverings, and simple plastic face shields worn without a mask are also unacceptable as face coverings. Face coverings should fully cover the mouth and nose at all times.
- For those who are not yet fully vaccinated, wearing a face covering is extremely important because asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic infected people feel well but still spread COVID-19 and are estimated to account for over 50% of viral transmission. Several COVID-19 viral variants are known to be present in Arkansas that have been shown to be significantly more contagious and to cause more severe disease. The CDC updated their website on 11/20/20 regarding community masking to state that masks serve as both “source control” (blocking airborne dispersion of virus-laden droplets and aerosols from the wearer) and also filtration to reduce the wearer’s exposure to infectious particles. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/more/masking-science-sars-cov2.html>
- Advise all congregants, staff and volunteers who are not yet fully vaccinated to maintain six (6) feet physical distancing from others except among household groups, both indoors and outdoors. As above, speakers and singers will require additional distance while speaking or singing without face coverings. Mark seating and areas for lines and cues accordingly.
- Advise people who are not yet fully vaccinated to refrain from any physical contact with each other outside of household groups. This includes hand shaking, touching, physical laying on of hands, hugging, or reverencing of hands/rings of clergy.
- Provide hand-sanitizing stations at all public entrances.
- As much as possible, move “meet and greet” times before and after services outdoors.
- Avoid or minimize the use of items that are traditionally touched or handled by many different people. Examples are offering plates, the Torah (touch only by the bearer), holy water stations, shared prayer and song books, and the common cup (chalice) for Holy Communion.
- If possible, refrain from having people come forward to a common altar rail for Holy Communion, blessing, altar call, etc.

- Sanitize all high-touch surfaces in the sanctuary and common areas after and between services and events.

**Other considerations:**

- Singers may practice or perform at six (feet) distance if all remain masked while singing. Fully vaccinated singers do not need to mask or physically distance. For simplicity, if a group of singers is of mixed vaccination status, the place of worship may elect to have all singers continue to mask and physically distance.
- As much as possible, hold informal in-person gatherings such as Bible studies, receptions and meals outdoors to reduce the risk of virus transmission and strongly recommend that participants who are not yet fully vaccinated wear face coverings and observe six (6) foot physical distancing outside of household contacts. Avoid the use of commonly touched items, especially in gatherings that include meals or refreshments.
- Gatherings that bring large groups of people together from multiple places of worship, widespread geographical areas or over multiple consecutive days should be avoided as long as community spread of COVID-19 remains active.