



Face Covering Update: February 18, 2022

1 message

UCA President's Office <presidentsoffice@uca.edu>

Fri, Feb 18, 2022 at 2:03 PM

Reply-To: noreply@uca.edu

To: FS <fs@uca.edu>, student@cub.uca.edu

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff:

Many people have stopped me in the past couple of weeks and asked if our guidance and masking policies are routinely evaluated. The answer is yes. Since March 2020, we have evaluated our on-campus masking protocol in light of guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Arkansas Department of Health, as well as local health conditions and capacity to manage cases of the COVID-19 virus. There have been some periods of time, such as the summer 2021, when face coverings were optional in all university spaces other than classrooms. As conditions have changed, so has our guidance.

Beginning in August of 2021, and coinciding with widespread transmission of the Delta variant, UCA instituted a face-covering requirement on campus when the CDC's level of community transmission for Faulkner County was in the 'high' or 'substantial' range. While many of us had hoped to move into a 'moderate' transmission status where masks would be optional, we never reached that level during the Delta variant or the onset of the new Omicron variant in December.

The specific characteristics of the Omicron variant combined with rapidly declining cases and hospitalization are changing the calculus of how public health and medical professionals are now talking about COVID-19. Because of Omicron's uniquely different characteristics, our weekly guidance system that was developed for the more aggressive Delta strain should be and is being reconsidered. Those changes will be addressed in the next week.

In the weekly meeting of the Pandemic Planning and Response team, there has also been a shift in our conversation regarding managing the virus now that vaccines are widely available and anti-viral treatments are mitigating severe cases of COVID-19. Part of that conversation is a recognition that we have reached a point where we are shifting from a public health crisis to a time of individual responsibility regarding personal health care decisions. Here at UCA, the wide availability of testing, vaccinations, isolation spaces, and various PPE options has ensured that individuals have the resources they need to make decisions about how to protect their personal health.

We know that COVID-19 will be with us for some time, and we will need to continually evaluate the data that we use to drive our decision making. As we approach the endemic stage of this virus, case counts and levels of community transmission may not be the only variables that drive on-campus masking and other mitigation decisions. We are currently reviewing on-campus data as well as information via our Testing & Tracing Consortium with Conway Regional Health System to identify appropriate metrics and conditions for determining whether or not masks or any other steps should be required on campus relative to this stage of our response. Again, more information will be coming in the next week regarding changes to mask requirements and general guidance. Please watch your emails for those updates.