

What does the “end of the mask mandate” mean for choirs?

On Thursday, March 10, Dr Bonnie Henry announced that masking was no longer mandatory in indoor spaces. She was clear that this does not mean the end of masking – just that we are being left to make our own decisions, based on situation and comfort level.

What does this mean for choirs?

The BC Choral Federation has always held that it is not our place to tell choirs what to do, through this pandemic – our job was to remain focused on what the Provincial Health Orders meant for singers. And nothing there has changed – choirs will make their own decisions and don't need BCCF to tell them what to do. In some cases the venue used for rehearsal or performance will have its own requirements around masking.

What we can do, though, is to get a picture of what is happening with choirs in the province, and share some of the concerns and solutions. And these may vary greatly, so good communication within each choir is vital.

What has not changed is that group singing is still very risky for transmission of the virus.

What has not changed is that the virus has not gone away. People are still getting sick, there are still folks being hospitalized, and the ICUs are still busy; people are dying.

What has not changed is that the unvaccinated person has fewer defenses against the virus, and is at greater risk than someone who has had all their vaccine shots

What has not changed is that we know the virus is primarily transmitted through aerosols on the breath, and that we know that singers put out more aerosols in singing than people do in talking.

What has not changed is that we have tools to mitigate the transmission of the virus

- vaccination
- masking
- sanitizing
- distancing
- ventilation

Every choir is different. A small group may feel that they can all trust each other because they've all been vaccinated, and they're all careful in everyday life. In a bigger choir, you may not feel you can know and trust everyone in the group. A choir with an average age in the 20s/30s may have a different perspective than a choir whose average age is in the 60s/70s.

Most choirs are proceeding with caution. There will almost always be someone who is not only not prepared to be maskless, but who is uncomfortable with unmasked people around them. As a choral community, we need to be aware of each other's needs and consider their well-being. The majority of choirs do not want anyone to leave because they no longer feel safe; if the consequence is remaining masked, well, it's what we've managed successfully since in-person rehearsals resumed.

All the mitigation tools are still in place, and will continue to be important even when choirs begin to move into mixed masking.

The closing words come from Joan Fearnley's blog on the Choral Canada website:

*Finally, when masking is no longer mandatory, **let kindness prevail**. Many choir members, for a number of private reasons, may wish to continue masking. It is the responsibility of choral leadership not only to set the tone on masking policy but to be mindful of any peer pressure among choir members. I encourage you to support their choice as much as possible, no questions asked.*