

COVID-19 Safety and Masking on Campus: What the Pandemic Response Team said in June 2022 and the Realities of September 2022

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At the June 16, 2022 meeting of University Council, the Pandemic Response Team (PRT) presented a report to Council that justified its recommendation to ‘pause’ the USask mask mandate on July 1, 2022.ⁱ This report was in response to a motion approved by University Council that ‘recommend that the President direct the Pandemic Response Team to provide, in writing to Council, a summary document highlighting the scientific and public health evidence considered in favour of dropping the mask requirement before this requirement ends.’

With the return to classes, the PRT’s report ‘highlighting the scientific and public health evidence considered in favour of dropping the mask’ is a useful benchmark for evaluating the continued ‘pause’ of this mask mandate.

Factors informing the PRT’s recommendation to ‘pause’ the USask mask mandate (June 9, 2022)	Current status of factors that informed the PRT recommendation (September 13, 2022)
Reported provincial COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are decreasing.	Successive increases in COVID-19 hospital admissions, ICU admissions and COVID-19 activity was reported by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health in mid-July and again on August 18, 2022. ⁱⁱ COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations have been increasing over the summer.
Pressures on the healthcare system/resources have stabilized and are decreasing. Current COVID-19 cases are being managed by our provincial healthcare system and resources.	Over the summer, the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) and the media have reported a series of disruptions to emergency services in Saskatchewan and ongoing pressures on our health care system.
Saskatoon COVID-19 wastewater levels have moderated and are low [https://water.usask.ca/covid-19/]	COVID-19 wastewater levels reported on September 12, 2022 are the fourth highest values observed in Saskatoon, and represent a 39.9% increase in SARS-CoV-2 viral load since last week, ⁱⁱⁱ and a 49.7% increase in the Ba.5
While adherence to reporting may also be a contributing factor, USask COVID-19 case counts are decreasing (2022 calendar year weekly numbers: high January 20th = 298; low June 7 = 3 cases) and are low.	Case counts on campus are increasing , increasing from 43 cases (week ending Sept 4) to 107 cases (week ending Sept 11). ^v

<p>Seasonal variation of the pandemic - approaching a valley - in addition to lower number of individuals indoors and on our campuses during this period.</p>	<p>The Saskatchewan Ministry of Health reported increases in COVID-19 hospitalization in mid-July and again on August 18, 2022. USask is returning to indoor activity with the start of the fall semester.</p>
<p>There is no provincial public health mask mandate (or other provincial COVID-19 public health directives). However, the Saskatchewan Health Authority and federal airport facilities continue with mask use.</p>	<p>There is no provincial mask mandate.</p>
<p>There are no current mandatory mask measures at Saskatchewan Polytechnic and the University of Regina. Mask measures are also absent, or will be discontinued June 30th, at many peer institutions across Canada (Dalhousie, McGill, Ottawa, Toronto, McMaster, Western, Calgary, Alberta, UBC)</p>	<p>USask can return to the leadership role it had during the earlier stages of the pandemic and show scientific and public policy leadership within the U15.</p> <p>Several peer universities have returned to mask and vaccination requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western: mask and vaccine requirement • Dalhousie: masks required in classrooms • Manitoba: masks required indoors
<p>Public Health expertise concurs with the recommendation to pause the USask mask mandate as indicated.</p>	<p>On August 19, 2022, Dr. Cory Neudorf (SHA Interim Senior Medical Health Officer) was quoted as saying “Most of the attempts at predicting that I’ve seen have shown that we will see a slow continued increase in cases through September and into early October” ... “We need a much higher rate of mask use right now” ... “Crowded indoor environment with strangers, those situations you should still be masking”^{vi}</p> <p>On August 19, 2022, Saskatchewan’s chief medical health officer, Dr. Saqib Shahab was quoted as saying “If you are in a crowded place with lots of people you don’t know, it’s a good idea to wear a mask and that’s increasingly going to be more important in the fall.”^{vii}</p> <p>Public health experts indicate that we need to increase our mask use.</p>

There is overwhelming evidence to support the return of a mask mandate, to protect USask students, staff, and faculty from COVID-19 infection. This evaluation is based on the PRT’s own criteria.

Further, evaluation of the risks of COVID-19 to the campus community need to consider the known effects of COVID-19 as well as the impact of long-COVID. The emerging SARS-CoV-2 variants are not milder, and COVID-19 is not like the flu.

The continued use of pictures of unmasked people in USask communications (web, etc.) undermines the ‘masks are encouraged’ message that USask purports to be sending. The call on USask members to “Protect the Pack” will be ineffective if individual desire is prioritized over collective safety and care.

No one is asking for a return to March 2020 social distancing measures. We can return to face-to-face teaching and learning with the simple protection of uniform mask use on campus. This is particularly important in

crowded areas such as large lecture halls, but also in the adjacent hallways that see large numbers of people at class change time.

What can we do? There are a few things we can do to help protect our health:

- ◆ Wear a mask! This will protect you from infection, and your example provides encouragement to others to wear masks. Individual leadership can be powerful, particularly when institutional leadership is absent
- ◆ Provide masks! I bring a small stack of masks to my classes this term – there’s never a class where a student doesn’t take at least one from me.
- ◆ As workers, Occupational Health and Safety laws in Saskatchewan give us: ^{viii}
 - ◇ The right to know the hazards at work and how to control them.
 - ◇ The right to participate in finding and controlling workplace hazards.
 - ◇ The right to refuse work that you believe is unusually dangerous.

Contact your local safety committee or the university level occupational safety committee to engage in your rights.

i <https://governance.usask.ca/documents/council/agenda/2021-2022/june-2022/9.0-2022-06-16-prt-report-to-council.pdf>

ii <https://web.archive.org/web/20220819044605/https://pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/136444/Integrated%2BEpi%2BSit%2BMonthly%2BReport%2BJuly17%2Bto%2BAug%2B13%2B2021.pdf>

iii https://twitter.com/usask_water/status/1569366462858403841

iv https://twitter.com/usask_water/status/1569366470768955392

v <https://covid19.usask.ca/about/safety.php#Casecounts>

vi <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/covid-19-wave-masking-hospital-capacity-1.6560968>

vii <https://regina.ctvnews.ca/mobile/basics-remain-the-same-sask-s-cmho-gives-advice-ahead-of-fall-covid-19-surge-1.6035044>

viii <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/business/safety-in-the-workplace/rights-and-responsibilities-in-the-workplace/duties-and-rights-of-workers>

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