

SA ready to lift regulations on wearing masks outdoors, says professor



OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK: Infectious diseases epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim believes the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic is over and SA is ready to lift the regulations on wearing masks
Picture: SANDILE NDLOVU

Unathi Nkanjeni

As SA experiences a significant drop in new Covid-19 infections, we should look at moving away from wearing masks and introduce a new strategy.

This is according to epidemiologist and former Covid-19 ministerial advisory committee chair Prof Salim Abdool Karim, who believes the worst is over and the country is ready to lift regulations on wearing masks and remove most Covid-19 measures.

Speaking on eNCA this week, Abdool Karim said a few measures would still have to be kept in place, specifically some restrictions on mass gatherings, vaccine policies and mask-wearing in certain indoor spaces.

He said there should be a new strategy on how to deal with the pandemic at this stage, given that it had been two years since it hit our shores.

"I don't know what the government's plans are on wearing masks, but what we've seen from other countries is that we have reached a stage where we can change our overall strategy.

"We can remove most of our restrictions and public health measures at this point.

"For example, we can get away from all of the sanitising, we can drop our outdoor mask-wearing mandate, but we are going to probably need to keep three things.

"The first is, we're going to have some measures to avoid major outbreaks in mass gatherings.

"Second, we're going to have to ensure that all indoor environments are largely restricted to individuals who are vaccinated.

"And finally, there will be certain areas where indoor mask-wearing will be important."

On Sunday, UDM leader Bantu Holomisa called for the scrapping of face masks.

Holomisa tweeted a picture of himself wearing a mask and wrote: "Masks must fall. It's time."

His call comes after health minister Joe Phaahla said during a media briefing on Friday that his department and other stakeholders were tasked with providing alternative safety measures to limit the spread and effect of the pandemic.

While it remains unclear if mask-wearing regulations will be scrapped, Phaahla said the World Health Organisation (WHO) had advised against complacency.

"As the WHO has stated at various forums, two of which I attended this week, Covid-19 is not over, as can be seen from the global numbers, and we must avoid reversing the hard-earned gains we have made as we strive to end the pandemic.

"We hope the reviewed health regulations, and others from other departments, will assist in a guided reopening of various economic and social activities, especially in the leisure and tourism areas, with less risk of superspreaders," Phaahla said. — *TimesLIVE*