

*CBS Mornings*

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[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Masking Uncertainty; Dr. Frieden on Travel Safety, and the Trend of the Pandemic]

GAYLE KING: Dr. Frieden, we're really glad you're here at the table. Listen, we are all COVID exhausted. We're over it. But COVID is not over us. Does it make sense to you — this ruling and should we leave it up to people to make their own decisions to mask or not mask?

DR. TOM FRIEDEN: Well, I'm a doctor, not a lawyer, so I can't comment on the legal case, but we rely on the society to make sure that your kid doesn't get hit by a drunk driver, that the food we eat in a restaurant doesn't make us terribly sick, that the rest — that the medicines we pick up at the pharmacy are not contaminated. In the same way, we need the government and society to be able to protect us if a more dangerous variant comes or another health threat comes.

TONY DOKOUPIL: So how much does this really matter? We heard from the immunocompromised person in Errol's piece, if — if you're wearing a mask yourself — one way masking as it's called — and everyone else is not, how much of a difference does that make?

FRIEDEN: You're a lot safer if everyone is masking. That's why we are all connected and that connection means that my health depends on what you do. But if other people around aren't masked, then if you're immunocompromised, older, then up your mask game to an N-95. It's not perfect, but it's more protective than a cloth mask or a surgical mask.

VLADIMIR DUTHIERS: How concerned are you about immunocompromised people traveling on planes? My father, for example, we've talked about bringing our families to South Africa. It's a 12, 14-hour flight. No one's masked, but he's masked. What would you recommend?

FRIEDEN: Unfortunately, if you're immunosuppressed or otherwise medically vulnerable, flying just got less safe for you.

DUTHIERS: Mmm.

FRIEDEN: Now, it's really hard to wear a mask for 10, 12, 14 hours, but that's what you might have to do if you want to reduce your risk for yourself personally. If all of us were masked up, all of us would be safer.

DUTHIERS: So, it sounds like you're saying he probably shouldn't get on a plane for that long.

FRIEDEN: You know, it's a risk-benefit calculation. How important is that trip to you? How important is that meeting or that meal? And if it's important, then you do it staying as safe as possible, meaning an N-95 mask for the whole way.

KING: Cases are already going up now. Don't you think this will mean cases will continue to go up?

FRIEDEN: Airplanes —

KING: That's what I struggle with and I struggle with people making the decision I'm not going to mask. If you could not wear a mask and it only affects you, good on you. But it affects so many other people.

FRIEDEN: With cases going up, the idea of masks coming down doesn't make a lot of sense. But we don't know what's going to happen yet, either with the severity of this particular wave, in terms of hospitalizations. We have great vaccines, great treatments — we need more people to get them — but the biggest concern is what's going to happen in the coming months?

KING: Yes.

FRIEDEN: What if we have a more dangerous variant that's deadly, that gets away from our vaccine-induced immunity. We really need these kinds of tools to protect people, not just to save lives, but also to keep our economy growing.

KING: What about kids that can't be vaccinated?

FRIEDEN: We've seen kids —

KING: Or can't get the vaccine and aren't wearing a mask?

FRIEDEN: — yeah. We've seen just yesterday new data out from the CDC, very severe illness in hundreds of kids, almost all of them unvaccinated from the ages of six to 11 —

KING: Under —

FRIEDEN: — so very important to get vaccinated, boosted, up to date, and to mask up, to recommend it at least and when disease is spreading —

DOKOUPIL: Yeah.

FRIEDEN: — spreading a lot to require it.

DOKOUPIL: Although, important to let parents know the vast majority of children do absolutely fine if they're healthy and they have no underlying issues.

FRIEDEN: Absolutely.

DOKOUPIL: We're waiting to hear from the CDC. Meantime, Dr. Tom Frieden, thank you so much for being here. We appreciate it.

FRIEDEN: Thank you.