Don't throw your masks away yet.

Finally, COVID-19 vaccines are being distributed in significant numbers across the city. With the FDA approving the single-dose shot from Johnson & Johnson and New Orleans entering modified Phase Three, it seems as though the pandemic's end is on the horizon. The thing is, even if you're vaccinated, the pandemic isn't over. Vaccination can take a couple of weeks to become effective, and it's still unknown if vaccinated people can still carry the virus. After a year of pandemic living, the same rules still ring true: wear a mask over your mouth and nose, remain socially distant, and reduce your contact with those outside of your household.

For many of you, it's your last semester at Loyola. You want to party, make memories outside of your household. The COVID-19 vaccines can effectively prevent the spread of the disease, but new variants in the virus leave more questions to be answered. While the vaccine protects against hospitalization and death, it's still unclear if vaccinated individuals can be carriers of COVID. The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines require two complete dosages with two weeks between shots. Having one round of the vaccine isn't enough to fully protect you or those around you.

The single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine requires two weeks after it's administered to become fully effective. The two week period between and after vaccine doses can feel like purgatory, but it's still important to be cautious and mindful. While we've waited a year, you can wait two more weeks.

The signs reminding us to wear masks and six foot markers in the Starbucks line have just become a part of daily life. But this isn't an excuse to get sloppy. We've been in this pandemic too long for people to be making excuses about mask wearing and guideline compliance. Half-masking isn't enough, and the chinstrap mask looks ridiculous. If we ever want to get out of this pandemic, we need to keep taking it seriously. While vaccines are an effective safeguard, they aren't the end all be all. We understand that everyone's tired of the pandemic and the rules, but according to the CDC, vaccinated people aren't entirely protected until at least two weeks after their complete dose of the vaccination is administered.

It's time to stop acting like things are normal again when the United States is nearing 540,000 deaths and less than 12% of the population is fully vaccinated. The harsh reality of the situation is this: while vaccines have been a cause for celebration, they're still only available to select members of the population. Not everyone has access to the vaccine and not everyone will choose to get it.

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