

# Business Safety as We Emerge From COVID-19 with Infectious Disease Epidemiologist & Infection Preventionist, Saskia Popescu

**PAYCHEX**  
Business Series

Coronavirus



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## Full transcript

### **Gene Marks:**

Hey everybody. This is Gene Marks and welcome to the Paychex Business Series Podcast. Today, you're going to hear a great conversation that will bring you completely up to date on all things health-related concerning COVID. I'm going to be speaking to Dr. Saskia Popescu who is the assistant professor, the Biodefense Program, no, this is not weaponry, at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. We had a great conversation about all the things that business owners should be considering as we emerge from the pandemic. And I also asked her specific questions about masks, cleaning surfaces, getting temperature checks, and even traveling as well. So very, very good information for you to help you run your business as safely as possible, and also hopefully get out on the road as well. So like I'd said to you Saskia, before we even started recording this, you're going to need to explain to our audience what exactly that means and what your specialty is. So go, tell us.

### **Saskia Popescu:**

Of course. So I am an infectious disease epidemiologist and infection preventionist, and biodefense is really about the notion that infectious diseases, whether they are naturally occurring outbreaks like SARS-CoV-2, which is COVID-19 or a lab accident in which we've seen with anthrax, in some cases, not really resulting in actual cases, but where we didn't activate something appropriately and even nefarious intent like biological attacks. So the spectrum of biological risks and threats is something that we really study in biodefense because we recognize that infectious disease threats, whether they're outbreaks, like I mentioned, intentional events, they pose a really big threat to global health and they require us to look at it from both the science and the policy perspective. So that's really what we focus on at Schar School.

### **Gene Marks:**

I have to wonder, how did you get into this? Is this what you always dreamed of doing when you were a ten-year-old back in elementary school?

**Saskia Popescu:**

So I've actually had this passion for infectious diseases since I was about eight years old and I know, super nerd as a child, and it just kind of developed and snowballed into when I found out really what biodefense and health security was, mostly just because I really recognized that studying infectious diseases was one really amazing thing, but the impact of them and how they could really challenge our approach to everyday life is something that I really found fascinating. And that's what we're living in COVID. I don't think people realize how far reaching an infectious disease could have on society, especially when we're experiencing a pandemic, but even on a smaller scale, it can be quite impacting.

**Gene Marks:**

Well, listen we have had it up to here with COVID. We've been living through this nightmare for the past year. We are on our way, hopefully towards recovery. And honestly, a lot of my clients, a lot of our listeners, I mean, we're just, we're sick and tired of it all. And yet we know that it's still reality and we have to see our way through this. So yeah, the economy's recovering, we've got vaccinations are continuing to go up and we're trying to open up our businesses. So let me ask you some specific questions about what's going on right now from a business owner's standpoint. So for starters, we hear a lot about variants. Should we be concerned about rising cases and variants as we're opening up our businesses?

**Gene Marks:**

And I'll tell you the reason why I asked this is that I had one doctor say to me, Saskia that he was fully vaccinated, but he still won't be eating out at a restaurant because he doesn't like the message that, that sends, it's still not safe. And I think to myself, like, Oh my goodness. I mean, these restaurant owners out there that are desperate for business, certainly don't want to hear that. So is he right by not wanting to eat out? I mean, he's concerned about variants, tell us what your thoughts are on that.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah, I think there's a couple of things to unpack there. The first question is, should we be concerned about variants and that's yes. Variants are not a novel concept. It's not unique to COVID-19. Viruses mutate, that's part of what they do. So it's expected. But when we have variants that have increased transmissibility, meaning they spread more efficiently, that is a concern. And we are starting to see the numbers of variants rise in the U.S. So it's something to worry about, for sure, especially as we do see this trend up in cases across the U.S.. So I encourage people to be mindful of that. Look at the CDC, look at your local public health department information to get what's going on in your community, but overall, always be mindful that case numbers change. And we want to be able to pivot if things really start to climb up. Now, when it comes to businesses and that comment, I think the hardest part for those of us really working in the infectious disease folks is that, there's risk and then there's perception.

**Saskia Popescu:**

And I was just in Seattle this weekend and I was amazed by how wonderful their outdoor dining was. I come from a state in Arizona right now where we've really struggled with those interventions. So I ate outside comfortably. I was very impressed with their protocols, so it can be safely done. Would I feel comfortable eating indoors right now, and I'm fully vaccinated? The answer is no, I think that is a higher risk activity. There's still a lot of questions we have about vaccine efficacy in terms of preventing asymptomatic infection. But I agree with his sentiments in that, people don't know your vaccination status, and if they see a full restaurant indoors that could signal, Oh, I shouldn't be worried about COVID. If all these people are eating indoors, then that's fine. We have seen outbreaks related to indoor dining because you're unmasked.

**Saskia Popescu:**

So to me, that is the highest kind of risk activity, eating, drinking indoors with a lot of other people for a prolonged period of time. So I like to encourage people, like how can we make this activity safer and bring it outdoors where it's separated and where people can still mask when they're interacting with staff.

**Gene Marks:**

Coming from somebody who's an epidemiologist, you are sort of the final answer, you're going to be the most conservative is when it comes to getting back to real life. So you're fully vaccinated, but you still don't feel comfortable eating indoors yet. So if I own a restaurant, is there anything I can do that can persuade you, considering your background and what you do, and the fact that you're fully vaccinated that yes, my establishment is safe for you to come in and eat.

**Saskia Popescu:**

It would really have to be a mixture of all the intervention strategies. So you would have to have a very, very small percentage of people in there. They would have to be well distanced. So the minimum really is that six foot rule. And I think people think of it and they're like, Oh, okay. As long as we're 6 feet apart, everything is safe. That is a minimum. That is one piece of the puzzle. Risk reduction is additive. So if you had tables that were least like 10, 12 feet apart, you have doors and windows open, you've got some good ventilation going in there. And then there were mask requirements when you were interacting with people, not at your table. I think that could make me feel safer. I just haven't seen that happen, honestly.

**Saskia Popescu:**

I had to pass through a restaurant the other day to go to the patio. And I was really surprised by how many people were in there and they were supposed to be operating at a lower capacity. But I think, we see these guidelines and we're like, okay, if it's only 25% of people, then we're less worried about all of the other intervention strategies. So if you are forced to do something inside, and again, I live in Arizona where we're going to be having temperatures sore pretty soon, having people at least 10 feet apart, really mindful of ventilation and air exchanges, because this is an unmasked environment for patrons is going to be super important.

**Gene Marks:**

That's fair enough. Again, getting back to, and this becomes a more of an issue as more people continue to be vaccinated. Can you give us any updates Saskia or at least your thoughts, what the research is showing about the transmissibility of the virus when somebody is fully vaccinated, the chance that somebody else can actually catch it from a fully vaccinated person.

**Saskia Popescu:**

So I think the hard part is we're still learning more of that. It seems to be very substantially decreased, which is helpful, but getting some information out of Israel has been helpful. I think they're showing anywhere between 80 and 90% decrease in COVID infection. So, or I should say SARS-CoV infection. So here's kind of the difference. And you get infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and some people are asymptomatic, meaning they have no symptoms. Some people are presymptomatic meaning they are infectious, but then don't develop symptoms until later. And some people entirely have symptoms. And we know that the whole goal of the vaccine is to prevent those severe symptoms and illness and deaths. What we're still trying to understand is does it prevent asymptomatic and presymptomatic infection? So right now we're seeing some positives, very optimistic data coming out that those who got vaccinated, very few of them did test positive for the virus. And if they did, they really didn't have any symptoms, but really trying to understand, okay, if that's the case, how infectious were they?

**Saskia Popescu:**

So I guess the moral of what I'm saying is we're not there yet where I would feel comfortable saying that. But I think the reason why we still have this guidance is because we're learning about this. This vaccine was developed in the middle of a pandemic where it's under such intense safety and scrutiny that we are collecting this data daily. So until we get more of that, where we feel comfortable making changes to guidance, I really encourage people to just be mindful of that. So I can't give you a number, but it is pretty significantly decreased, but that being said, the CDC guidance still says, if you are vaccinated and you're going to go to a restaurant, you should still wear your mask. When you're there, you should still be mindful of all of those other infection prevention measures.

**Gene Marks:**

It's funny when I'm learning from you as well is that, it seems like it's good news, but there's just not enough data. And in your role and in defense of our public health officials, without firm data, they're trying to come up with a strategy that's as safe and as conservative as possible. And I'm sure people in the public health field would be more than thrilled to tell everybody to throw away their masks and get back to real life. But they can't say that for certain. So they just have to be careful.

**Saskia Popescu:**

And I think the hard part too, is I have friends and even family who are small business owners and I've given them guidance and thoughts throughout this entire thing. And it is so frustrating because I wish I could provide more of like a binary answer, yes or no, but it's always with a caveat because that's where we are. And infectious diseases are not so black and white, it's a lot of varying grades of shay and risk awareness. So when we look at something like a gym or a restaurant, I can say yes, but... . I hope people know that that is entirely... It's a heartbreaking piece to working in public health because we all want to go back to a much normal life. But also, I have colleagues who their spouses are business owners, and this has been very impacting to them. So we're all working towards a collective goal.

**Gene Marks:**

So you can clear up one question and again, it's tough for you to do this without again, because all the data's not in, but is it true, and I ask this because employers are struggling with, should they require employees to get vaccines or not? And what is the implication in their workplace for people who have been vaccinated or not vaccinated. So based on what you know, if somebody does get infected by a coworker that's been fully vaccinated, say it does get passed on, isn't the effects of it less, in other words, to people, that the chance of them being hospitalized is much less than it was before vaccinations?

**Saskia Popescu:**

So are you asking if the person that's been infected is vaccinated or is unvaccinated?

**Gene Marks:**

That's a good question. Let's start, first of all, with the person that's been vaccinated.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Gene Marks:**

We know that the vaccinations are not 100% effective, of course, because nothing is. But my understanding is that if you've been fully vaccinated, you can still get COVID, it could still happen, but the effects of it would be much less, the chance of hospitalization is much lower. So number one, is that true in your understanding?

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah. We know that people who are fully vaccinated so far, you know that was kind of that gray area where we believe it's pretty significant protection against infection, even if it's asymptomatic, but with the data we have really strong information on is that prevention of severe disease and mortality. So that's that 95% efficacious.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Saskia Popescu:**

And so, yes, so people who are vaccinated have great protection against severe disease and mortality, and let's say they were that very small percentage that we're still learning about who gets infected with SARS-CoV-2 but they really don't have any symptoms. If they pass that on to a colleague that who is not vaccinated, that would not have any impact on their disease. If you're vaccinated and for some reason you're among that small percentage that gets SARS-CoV-2, and you were to give it to somebody else that's not going to impact their level of COVID-19. Their vaccination status, their immune system is what's going to change their response to that.

**Gene Marks:**

So they could still get just as sick as anything else.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah.

**Gene Marks:**

Got it. Okay. That's fine. Alright. Let's pivot a little bit, because again, I want to try and get out of the way of get some other issues in the workplace resolved. Cleaning and surfaces. Back in the day when this thing first broke a year ago, I mean, I had clients that were still open they're essential businesses and they're running around and cleaning surfaces and trying to keep everything sterilized and whatever. And then I read reports that really COVID, the transmissibility of it over surfaces is really nowhere near as much of a risk as what was originally thought. Is that true? Can you shed some light on that?

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah. So any time we're dealing with a novel disease, especially a respiratory pathogen, because a lot of them are transmitted through fomites, those inanimate objects and surfaces that become contaminated. So flu, RSV, those kinds of things are very easy to transmit that way. So when we're dealing with these new diseases, we use all those intervention strategies, because that's what we know. And we've seen them be efficacious for other ones. So we threw everything, but the kitchen sink at COVID and for good reason, but as time progressed, we noticed from more of an epidemiological standpoint, that not a lot of transmission was occurring just from those surfaces. It's more, this is a respiratory pathogen. We say it's spread through shared air so that close contact, inhalation of respiratory particles. So that cleaning piece, I struggle with, because on one hand, is it a main driver for COVID-19 transmission?

**Saskia Popescu:**

No. It can happen. It does happen on very small levels, but the hardest piece is that there's a lot of other infectious diseases out there that are spread this way. So I get so nervous when we talk about, well, so we don't need to be cleaning and disinfecting as much. It's like, well, we do, we weren't doing it enough in the beginning. And this is part of the reason why we also saw flu and respiratory virus season this year so low. And it was much more mild than we'd ever seen because all of these interventions were paying off. So I encourage people when you're looking at interventions from your workplace and cleaning and disinfection should always be happening, those are important things, but we want to make sure we're doing all of the interventions, masking, ventilation, distancing, those things.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. It's funny that you say that because if COVID has taught us anything that, we should be washing our hands more and COVID, or no COVID for the foreseeable future. So a valuable thing that a business owner should always be doing is encouraging their employees, wash your hands and keep surfaces clean and have a clean... Because it's not just COVID, it's like you said, a whole bunch of other potential viruses that are out there. Saskia, how about temperature checks? I mean, just recently I was going into a restaurant to takeout order, which I had to pick up inside the restaurant and before it was allowed inside they checked my temperature and I was just thinking to myself, really, are they still doing this? Is that necessary?

**Saskia Popescu:**

And that's kind of a tough one because is it entirely futile? No, you can still have fevers of course, with COVID and other respiratory infections and other diseases. But what we do know is that a pretty significant portion of COVID-19 infections are asymptomatic or presymptomatic. So you wouldn't catch those with a temperature check. I struggle with it because on one hand I don't want to totally discourage it, but on the other, it does feel a little bit like hygiene theater. And I would rather, we focus on other efforts because we know that statistically speaking, what you're going to pick up is pretty minimal. Body temperature is so varied between people and those temperature devices are not always the most reliable. So there's a lot of, I would say if you have to pick between that and other interventions, I would say, invest in some great masks for your employees or HEPA filter for the space, things like that.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay. So we've talked a little bit about restaurants and retail. A lot of our listeners just run business to business, B2B companies and they're located in an industrial park somewhere, or they've got, in a manufacturing facility or an office complex. So let me address them. Let's assume Saskia you are not doing this very cool job that you have, and you are doing something really boring, like manufacturing, corrugated containers, or putting together assemblies of widgets, which is what most businesses in this country do. And you've got employees in your workplace. You've got a location in an industrial part somewhere. Maybe you've got 50, 75 people coming to work every day. What advice do you have if you were running that company, what would you be doing right now to make sure that it's as safe as possible for your employees?

**Saskia Popescu:**

I would make sure that they have access to good masks. And they're working in an environment where we've implemented safety protocols. And that means access to hand sanitizer and hand soap, enough breaks to do things like that, because that's something we don't always consider, obviously, cleaning and disinfection, but... . Are we ensuring that they can distance appropriately? And that there is adequate ventilation and filtration in that space, and are we providing environments for them to eat and take breaks outside because that's a hard piece. Unmasked time is going to be our highest risk and break rooms can be those exact little cluster events. So I encourage people to really look at their workflow and make sure that you are providing that space. I cannot stress to you how exhausting it is to work a 12 hour day in a mask.

**Saskia Popescu:**

And you don't realize how dehydrated you become. So making sure that your employees have time for breaks to take their mask off, get some freedom for that a little bit, breathe in without a mask on because it gets a little toasty in there, and drink water, hydrate up and just have that mental break is so important. And having that is, I don't think people realize just the amount of time that can honestly take. So those pieces ensuring an environment that is a no blame for, if you are exposed, if your kiddo tests positive for COVID-19 or your spouse does, and you are exposed that you should probably stay home from work, if you're not vaccinated. So making sure that people feel comfortable sharing that they might need to quarantine, or

they're not feeling that well, and they should probably stay home. I think that's been the biggest challenge we have seen in general because not everybody has that ability and especially if you are an hourly employee, you might not have that protection. So encouraging this to be an environment where safety and health are prioritized.

**Gene Marks:**

Great answer. We're running a little bit short of time, but just a couple quick questions to ask you. And you had mentioned earlier that you traveled to Seattle from Arizona, I'm assuming, correct?

**Saskia Popescu:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Gene Marks:**

So, yeah. So first of all, I love this about you, that you're eating out at restaurants. That's great from an epidemic-. I like to hear that. And I like to hear that you're traveling.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Outside though. Outside.

**Gene Marks:**

Outside. Yep, yep, yep. That's right. And you are traveling and I'm assuming you flew to Seattle.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yes.

**Gene Marks:**

So give us some advice for traveling. When we get back to traveling, which people already are. If we're going to go to business meetings, conferences, let's start with the travel itself. What advice do you have for us business travelers?

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah. So I think the first piece I would say is I'm traveling for work. We're not vacationing right now. My husband is not fully vaccinated, but even then, it's important to be mindful about just travel in general right now. So when it comes to traveling for work, because we all have to do it in some cases. I encourage people to make sure they don't travel if they've recently been exposed or they're awaiting a test result, you've got a good mask. So mask quality is all about fit and filtration. The CDC website is really helpful for that, that you are going to be wearing the whole time. Eat before you travel. So the reason I say this is we have spent so much time and energy at airports, focusing on restaurants and bars, where people are likely to flock.

**Saskia Popescu:**

And I see this trend where people go and get the food and the drinks to go and then take them to the gate because they think that's safer. And then they're all sitting, versus the restaurant, which was actually spaced pretty appropriately. They're all sitting like one chair away from each other at the gate, eating at the same time and drinking, and then talking to whoever they're traveling with. And I'm just like, this is the problem. So that risk perception, I think is perhaps one of the biggest challenges we face for traveling. The airplane, it's a pretty safe environment. The air exchanges are every three minutes. My husband's actually an aerospace engineer. And he was just telling me about the level of filtration that air goes through. And it is phenomenal. So I'm less concerned about the airplane when people are fully masked.



**Saskia Popescu:**

The studies we've seen are all about masking the entire time. So if you are flying and you need to drink some water because you get dehydrated on a plane, make sure that you're cognizant of those around you, is everybody else masked? Great. That's the time to drink some water. If everybody else is eating and drinking, probably you should hold off. And that's also one of the other human factors things I've seen where we're handing out drinks and snacks at the same time. So everybody pulls down their mask to eat and drink at the same time. So I think just being super cognizant of your surroundings and trying to minimize the time that you might be unmasked around those who are also unmasked.

**Gene Marks:**

Great answer. Last question. And it does have to do with masks. Obviously, we're still in a stage right now, we're speaking you and I at the very end of March of 2021. And we're still in the stage where people are wearing masks and it is because cases are on the rise in some places, as well as the fact that vaccinations still have a long way to go, but at some point Saskia, and I don't know when that will be, but I'm assuming it will be summertime. There will be enough vaccinations available for those who want a vaccination. And so my first question to you on that is, do you agree with that timeline? And my second question is, and again, this is just your thoughts on the future, do you feel that businesses will be as much under pressure to require people to wear masks when vaccinations are so fully available? Would you do that as a business owner? So I'm curious to hear your thoughts on both of those issues.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah. I think for the vaccination timeline, we're pretty optimistic about what we're seeing for this summer just because a lot of States have opened up vaccines to those 16 and over, which is really exciting, but we're still really struggling with ensuring equitable vaccine distribution and vaccine hesitancy. So those are going to be two of our big hurdles. When it comes to requiring masks, I think again, I kind of go back to that kind of caveat answer where we still are learning a little bit more and more every single day about how the vaccines hold up against asymptomatic infection and transmission. So until we get a better handle on that, I think masks are going to be pretty much in our future. But when it comes to vaccine status, I really struggle with requiring vaccines and the notion of vaccine passports.

**Saskia Popescu:**

I think it is so important to encourage and provide coverage so that if people go get vaccinated and they feel crummy afterwards, they can stay home without being penalized. But I also think it's really important to just kind of acknowledge that while vaccines might be available to people, they might not also be truly distributed at an equity level to all areas that need it. And some people may not feel comfortable getting vaccinated or it might be contra-indicated for them. So when you were considering requiring a vaccine for a business, I highly stress that that could create an equity issue. And just the sheer operationality of that is really complicated. And it requires private health information.

**Saskia Popescu:**

So I think it's important to, right now the CDC guidance is only about those who have been fully vaccinated, not needing to quarantine after an exposure, as long as they can keep masking and everything like that. So I would stress caution with that. I would say, yeah, encourage people to get vaccinated, but don't make that a term of employment or in any way, shape or form, impact their ability to do their job or their treatment while they're doing their job.



**Gene Marks:**

Dr. Saskia Popescu is the Assistant Professor of the Biodefense Program at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. Saskia, thank you so much. That was great information. We'd love to have you back. Sometime later on this year, you'll give us an update on where things stands and more advice for business owners, but I appreciate you taking the time. It was very helpful.

**Saskia Popescu:**

Yeah. Thanks so much for having me.

**Gene Marks:**

My name is Gene Marks. If you'd like more information on how to run your business or advice for running your business, please join us for at the Paychex Podcast Business series and also on the Paychex website, that's [paychex.com/worx](https://paychex.com/worx). That's W-O-R-X. Again, my name is Gene Marks. Thanks so much for joining us today. We will be back with another podcast episode shortly, take care.

**Speaker 3:**

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