



You Can Legally Drink Indoors Right Now At Chicago's Airports — A 'Ludicrous' Double Standard, Critics Say

[Bob Chiarito @richiarito](#)

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Bars and restaurants are open at O'Hare and Midway — despite higher COVID-19 risks among travelers. "It's the double standards that get me, and the airport is one more example of it," one Chicago restaurant owner said.

CHICAGO — Restaurants and bars across the state are banned from serving customers indoors, but there are two places in Chicago where you can still legally drink inside a bar: the city's airports.

Despite an [emergency travel order](#) requiring travelers from 46 states to quarantine upon landing in Chicago, people are still allowed eat and drink alcohol inside bars at Midway and O'Hare. That's because the airports are exempt from Gov. JB Pritzker's Tier 3 mitigation measures.

Allowing indoor drinking at high-traffic airports is dangerous, one doctor said, calling the move "ludicrous."

The [rules](#), which went into effect Nov. 20, say restaurants and cafeterias within airports, hospitals and college dining halls can remain open as other bars and restaurants in affected state regions must close. These places are exempt to ensure people "can eat a meal with no alternatives provided in these venues for eating," the measure states, and patrons must wear masks when waitstaff approach them when they are not eating or drinking at a table.

The rule does not address bars. At both airports, there are no liquor establishments that do not also sell food, although people can sit unmasked and drink at a restaurant's bar without ordering food.

On Monday and Tuesday, unmasked customers were seen imbibing at bars at establishments inside O'Hare and Midway, including at Chili's Bar, Goose Island brewery and Berghoff Cafe.

While patrons had distance between them at the bars, maskless patrons at The Jazz Bar inside O'Hare's Terminal 1 were being served drinks by a bartender with his mask hanging down around his chin.

Despite the state order's language, both airports have takeout spots that offer an alternative to indoor dining. For example, McDonald's restaurants at the airports don't have dedicated seating areas.

Dr. Daryl Wilson, director of emergency medical services at Edward Hospital in Naperville, who treats coronavirus patients every day, said allowing people to dine at restaurants and bars inside the airports as the virus spreads is "ludicrous."

"Airports are enclosed places. People can take food with them and sit down at the gate, where they can space out from others," Wilson said. "If everything is takeout in other spots, you can still do takeout there. When you're all in a restaurant or a bar, it's ludicrous."

[Bars and restaurants have proven significant places of spread in Illinois](#), experts have said. Drinking indoors at a bar is considered by experts to be [the riskiest action during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), and eating indoors at a restaurant is also high on the list.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said travel can also increase someone's risk of spreading and getting COVID-19.

“Postponing travel and staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19,” [the agency advises](#).

The city of Chicago can and has implemented coronavirus restrictions that are stricter than the state rules, such as the [Emergency Travel Order](#) that requires anyone coming into the city from 46 states to quarantine for 14 days. But the city doesn’t have any rules in place for dining and drinking in at the airports.

‘Double standards’ stings state restaurant owners

The airport exemption smacks of a double standard to many local bar owners, said Pat Doerr, managing director of the Hospitality Business Association of Chicago. The organization, a nonprofit chamber of commerce for locally owned bars and restaurants, opposes the dine-in restrictions.

Kevin Vaughan, who operates five Vaughan’s Bar and Grill locations in Chicago, agreed.

“People have to eat, no doubt about it. But why should they be able to sit and drink? It is a double standard,” Vaughan said. “I just don’t think the alcohol thing should be part of the equation.”

Vaughan said it’s already frustrating big-box stores have remained open during the pandemic as small bars and restaurants are forced to close for good.

“We’re stuck in the middle and getting kicked around from all sides,” Vaughan said. “Walmart is open and the malls are open. ... All kinds of things are being defined as essential but are iffy. I mean, who needs to shop for a Gucci bag? It’s the double standards that get me, and the airport is one more example of it.”

Robert “Bobby” Klans, owner of Dunning Pourhouse at 7718 W. Addison St., said he wishes his establishment was subject to the airport “loophole.” Instead, he’s hoping carryout orders will be enough for the restaurant and bar to survive.

Jen Littleton, manager of B.L.U.E.S. on Halsted in Lincoln Park, which has been closed since March, said she wants strict mandates across the board. They should apply to all establishments, regardless of where they’re located, “so we can get out of this faster,” she said.

“I want businesses that can be open safely to be open, but I just want us to get through it as fast as we can,” she said.

Doerr said any restrictions the city would impose in response to Pritzker’s exemption would have to be a citywide rule rather than just focused on the airports.

“Our lawyers believe that [government] can’t give executive orders on a ZIP-code-by-ZIP-code basis,” Doerr said. “City regulations to address maybe 30 businesses at both airports seems like an overreach that will lead to unintended consequences.”

Lightfoot's office acknowledged the city can implement rules to restrict seated dining or drinking at airports, but they have leaned on the state's guidelines to date.

"The city's COVID-19 restrictions align with the state's guidelines, which permit restaurants located in airports, hospitals and colleges and universities to serve residents and visitors while still abiding by restaurant guidelines, including ensuring staff and patrons wear masks, social distance, limit gatherings and follow strict cleaning standards," mayoral spokesperson Patrick Mullane said.

Dr. Sudip Bose, an emergency physician at Medical Center Hospital in Texas, said regardless of the opportunities available to congregate in airports, people who must travel can make smart choices to reduce their risk of exposure.

"History of regulations in an arena shows there will always be loopholes. Plug one and another emerges," Bose said. "... I think the best outcomes stem from our personal behavior and decisions. Wearing a mask, physically distancing and washing hands are decisions we personally make that will surpass anything the government can do to limit COVID."

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