

# Arizona Congressman Andy Biggs tweets against wearing masks, gives other questionable COVID-19 advice

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Rep. Andy Biggs is neither a physician nor a scientist but he continues to attack public health advice and scientific evidence on COVID-19.

Biggs, R-Ariz., whose 5th Congressional District includes most of the East Valley area, in recent days has posted a string of pro-hydroxychloroquine and anti-mask messages on social media.

In his latest tweets, Biggs urges Arizonans to flout national and local public health guidance on COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, or new coronavirus. He says Arizonans should be able to use hydroxychloroquine as a preventive COVID-19 measure, though it's not recommended for prophylactic use by the federal or state government.

[Earlier this summer](#), Biggs challenged Arizona's rising hospitalization numbers and suggested the COVID-19 pandemic was being blown out of proportion.

As of Tuesday, the Arizona Department of Health Services was reporting 206,045 COVID-19 cases and 5,221 known deaths from the respiratory illness.

"There's no medical basis for what he's telling people to do and he has no scientific standing to make these statements," Dr. Lee Ann Kelley, Maricopa County Medical Society president, said of Biggs.

"It is absurd this has become a political issue instead of a public health issue," Kelley said. "There is tons of evidence that masks do work and I do believe one of the reasons Arizona's numbers went down was because of the

mask mandates."

There is real "cause and effect" evidence that masks do work and for Biggs to tell people that wearing a mask is about freedom is "highly irresponsible," she said.

Arizona experienced a spike in COVID-19 cases in June and July that overwhelmed hospitals to a point where they canceled elective surgeries, scrambled to add COVID-19 beds and negative pressure rooms, and hired nurses and respiratory therapists from other states.

Arizona has one of the highest infection rates in the country, the CDC's COVID tracker says. Its death rate of 72 COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people is above the U.S. average of 57 deaths per 100,000 people, the CDC says.

In his tweets, Biggs says Arizonans should "fight the medical establishment" to have more access to hydroxychloroquine. The drug "has unfortunately become too politicized, including in Arizona," he tweeted Aug. 31. He has since tweeted in support of Arizonans' "right to try" hydroxychloroquine five more times.

Hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine are anti-malarial drugs that were used as a treatment for certain hospitalized COVID-19 patients early on in the pandemic under an emergency use authorization from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The FDA revoked that emergency use authorization June 15 because the federal agency found that that found the medicines "showed no benefit for decreasing the likelihood of death or speeding recovery."

On July 1, the FDA issued a summary of safety issues with the use of hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine to treat hospitalized patients with COVID-19. Those issues include reports of serious heart rhythm problems, blood and lymph system disorders, kidney injuries and liver failure.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey on April 2 [issued an executive order](#) that says Arizona providers may prescribe hydroxychloroquine to someone who has COVID-19. But they can't prescribe it to prevent COVID-19, the order

says.

In a Sept. 1 [interview](#) with conservative radio host Ed Martin on the Pro America Report, Biggs says that in Arizona it is "basically illegal to fill a prescription for someone who is not getting hydroxychloroquine for lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or for malaria and that's absurd."

Biggs did not mention that providers are allowed to prescribe hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19.

Biggs spokesman Daniel Stefanski confirmed Wednesday via text message that Biggs is aware of Ducey's executive order and that in the interview with Martin he was trying to highlight the inability for Arizona providers to prescribe the drug prophylactically for COVID-19.

Biggs told Martin in the interview that hydroxychloroquine is "a safe drug that seems to have some positive effects, so let us make that choice. Let us as free individuals make that choice after meeting with our physician."

He blames restrictions on the drug that are in place in various states on "petty tyrants."

The Arizona Department of Health Services does not recommend hydroxychloroquine be used prophylactically outside of a clinical trial, department spokesman Steve Elliott wrote in an email.

Elliott confirmed that Ducey's executive order is still in effect and that Arizona providers may prescribe hydroxychloroquine to patients with COVID-19, as long as it's not as a preventive measure.

"We continue to review the current medical literature and will update if appropriate," Elliott wrote.

Biggs' tweets also urge Arizonans to "unmask," saying it is a "path of renewed freedom."

"In general, people need to understand the point of wearing a mask is so you are protecting others from what you are exhaling," said Dr. Ross Goldberg, a general surgeon in Phoenix who is president of the Arizona Medical Association.

"The mask isn't to protect you from stuff coming towards you, it's to prevent you from spreading anything that you are breathing out. If you are wearing a mask and someone else is wearing a mask you have now both protected each other from each other."

Science has already shown that the use of cloth or surgical masks by the general public will significantly reduce transmission, Goldberg said, though it's not a perfect prevention measure.

It also works best if everyone participates, he said.

"If I'm in a crowd of people and I'm the only one wearing a mask, the only one who is protecting people is me," Goldberg said. "I'm not protected; I'm protecting others."

A June 1 [article in the Lancet](#), a top medical journal, reviewed 172 different observational studies from 16 countries and found face mask use could largely reduce the risk of infection.

A [study published June 11](#) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal found that COVID-19 transmission is primarily airborne and that widespread mask-wearing "significantly reduces the number of infections." Without masks, social distancing is not enough, according to the article, which studied trends in Wuhan, China; Italy; and New York City.

"I wear them in the operating room to protect the patient from me. Not to protect me from the patient," Goldberg said. "It may protect me from a blood splatter. But when I'm operating I'm operating over a sterile field. You don't want me breathing over that sterile field."

Arizonans at some point should be able to safely unmask when disease transmission levels reach a "very low" point, Goldberg said.

"Are you going to go see a politician when you get sick or are you going to go see your doctor?" Goldberg asked.

"And if the answer is that you are going to go see your doctor, then why are we listening to politicians now giving medical advice when we won't listen



to them about any other medical advice?"

Biggs, who also leads the conservative House Freedom Caucus on Capitol Hill, and his constituents are not under "any mandate to subscribe to any particular health organizations or health studies," Stefanski wrote in a text message.

"He doesn't believe that he knows better, nor does he believe that an organization or study knows what is best for him," Stefanski wrote. "He, along with each of his constituents, should have the freedom to choose what is best for themselves, their families, and their loved ones in any health scenario."

Bureaucrats, health officials and local government leaders have been wrong more than they have been right when it comes to COVID-19, Stefanski wrote.

Kelley said that there are all kinds of existing public health rules in society to keep everyone safe, such as wearing seatbelts, following speed limits and not smoking in public places where people would have to breathe secondhand smoke.

"I believe that these precautions — wearing masks and social distancing — are crucial toward eliminating the virus or at least reducing it to manageable numbers and helping us as a state survive until we get a vaccine," she said. "... Rep. Biggs needs to stay in his lane."