The Truth About Masks

We have worn masks in health care for years. Now that everyone is talking about masks, there are some truths that bear repeating, and some misinformation that should be clarified. Understanding the “who,” “what,” and “when” of mask-wearing can help to make this all less mysterious.

Q: What do masks do?
A: Sometimes people wear masks to filter germs from the air they inhale, and sometimes the mask is worn by the person whose germs we want to filter out. Sometimes masks are worn for both purposes at the same time. The purpose of the mask defines the type of mask. For example:
- In surgery, surgical masks are worn by the health care team to prevent germs from reaching the patient’s incision AND to prevent body fluids from the patient reaching the health care team.
- In isolation rooms, procedure masks—or N-95 masks—are worn by the health care worker to prevent the patient’s germs from reaching the health care worker.
- When the infected patient leaves the room, the patient wears a procedure mask to prevent the germs from leaving their mouth and reaching another person.

Q: How does a cloth mask help?
A: Respiratory viral infections, including COVID-19, are most often spread when respiratory droplets from an infected person pass into the air through a sneeze, a cough, or speaking. Cloth masks prevent all or many of those droplets from being projected into the air and being inhaled by someone. A recent study¹ found that wearing a mask results in as much as a 60-80% reduction in COVID-19 transmission. This could be even higher if you combine it with eye protection and distances of 3-6 feet. Wearing a mask also reduces the likelihood of touching your nose and mouth. Viruses are spread by unclean hands as well as by droplets!

Q: Is it better if both people wear a mask?
A: The best protection is provided when everyone is masking. However, wearing a mask even when others don’t still offers protection. Masking will block some of the larger respiratory droplets expelled by a non-mask wearer. You could still become infected by touching your face with unwashed hands, so continue practicing good hand hygiene.

Q: Should masks be worn only by people who are sick?
A: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), data² shows that up to 40% of people with COVID-19 may experience no symptoms (asymptomatic) or they may have no symptoms at the time of spread, but develop them later (pre-symptomatic). For this reason, we need to wear a mask even if we are not experiencing symptoms.

Q: How should I wear my mask?
A: Masks are most protective if they cover both your nose and your mouth.
Q: What about the masks with valves? Do they work?
A: While they may be more comfortable, the masks with valves allow the droplets to escape, so we don’t recommend those masks be worn to prevent spread of viruses.

Q: Can I choose between Social Distancing and wearing a mask? What if we are together outside?
A: Masking is just one of the proven tools in slowing the spread of COVID-19. It’s not a substitute for social distancing and hand hygiene. Wearing a mask AND keeping a social distance of 3-6 feet from others is more effective when both are done, since neither is completely effective alone. Of course adding the practices of good hand hygiene and disinfection, and avoiding crowded indoor locations provides additional safety.

Q: Do I need to wear a mask if I’ve already had COVID-19 or if I’ve recently had a negative test?
A: The full risk of getting COVID-19 more than once is not yet understood. Like most respiratory infections, scientists believe it is likely that people will be able to get COVID-19 more than once, although there is likely to be temporary immunity for at least some time after infection. Testing is not 100% accurate and represents only one moment in time. Since people can spread disease prior to having symptoms, a mask should still be worn to protect others.

Q: What if other people around me aren’t wearing a mask. Should I say something?
A: At CHI Health, we require masking by staff and visitors in order to protect patients and our health care workers. In public, it’s recommended that you control your own exposure to others who are not wearing a mask by creating further distance between yourself and the unmasked person, backing away from a crowded room, or waiting for the next elevator. Most adults and children are more likely to wear masks when others are doing so, and masking is a social norm, so setting a good example is always helpful. When friends and family choose to not wear a mask, using the phone or virtual chat to communicate is probably best.

Q: How should I care for my cloth mask?
A: 1. Wash your hands before removing the mask.
2. Do not touch the body of the mask (the part over nose and mouth). It may be contaminated from your breathing, coughing or sneezing.
3. If the mask has ear loops, hold both of the ear loops and gently lift and remove the mask. If the mask has ties, untie the bottom bow first then untie the top bow and pull the mask away from you as the ties are loosened. If the mask has head straps/bands, lift the bottom strap over your head first then pull the top strap over your head.
4. Wash it in the washing machine with hot water and completely dry on medium or high heat.
5. Wash hands with soap and water or hand sanitizer.

References
3 Howard et al. Face Masks Against COVID-19: An Evidence Review, PNAS May 20, 2020