

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT CHECK: COVID-19 and Face Masks

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FACT CHECK: Masks don't work. **FALSE**

CLAIM: Masks don't help prevent the spread of COVID-19. That's why we were not told to wear them in the first place. **FALSE.**

FACT: Wearing face masks was not required during the first part of the COVID-19 response as it was not yet clear if they would help in mitigating COVID-19, and with this widespread pandemic, medical masks were going to be in short supply. We needed to conserve them for health care providers who were in most need. However, we did know that wearing face coverings in the context of other respiratory diseases, such as tuberculosis and influenza, had been shown to reduce the transmission of those diseases. (Chiang, C., Chiang, C., Chiang, C., & Chen, Y.) Eventually, model simulations using data from New York and Washington suggested that broad use of face coverings could significantly reduce community transmission of COVID-19 and decrease the number of hospitalizations and deaths.

FACT CHECK: Masks dangerously force you to re-breathe your own air. **FALSE.**

CLAIM: Wearing a mask for prolonged periods of time can drastically reduce the wearer's oxygen levels, which can lead to hypoxemia, a condition in which there is low arterial oxygen supply, or hypoxia, a condition where the supply of oxygen in the tissue is not sufficient.

CLAIM: Wearing a mask will cause you to rebreathe exhaled carbon dioxide resulting in carbon dioxide toxicity, or hypercapnia. **FALSE.**

FACT: Simply put, properly fitted masks offer adequate airflow while still covering your nose and mouth. They not only allow oxygen into the body, but make the accumulation of carbon dioxide impossible. Medical professionals wear masks for multiple hours per day, without adverse effect or issues.

A face covering can include a paper or disposable mask, cloth mask, neck gaiter, scarf, bandanna, or a religious face covering. A two-ply cotton covering is best. A face covering must cover the mouth and nose completely. The covering should not be overly tight or restrictive and should feel comfortable to wear. An overly tight or restrictive mask may cause complications or make wearing for extended periods of time impossible.

In Minnesota, we do not have a defined list of recognized medical or mental health conditions or disabilities that would prevent someone from wearing a face covering. Even if there were, there is individual variation in tolerance for wearing a face covering among people with the same condition. Generally speaking, people who have medical or other health conditions, disabilities, or mental health, developmental, or behavioral needs that make it difficult to tolerate wearing a face covering, are exempt. Any person who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, sleeping, incapacitated, or is otherwise unable to remove the face covering without assistance should not wear a mask. Additionally, any child 2 or under should not wear a mask. Young children over 2 should be kept under observation.

Be careful. Not all masks are appropriate. For example, masks with valves should not be used, as they release your breath through the valve. Face shields are not a recommended replacement, but can be used with a mask

Minnesota's Executive Order on face coverings not only provides exemptions for people who are unable to wear a face covering due to a medical or mental health condition or disability, but also allows people without such conditions to temporarily remove their face covering while communicating with someone who is deaf or hard of hearing or who has a condition or disability that makes communication with that individual while wearing a face covering difficult.

Simply put: wearing a face mask is easy and the best thing to do for yourself and others when you cannot maintain a 6' distance. If you can wear a face mask, please do so in these circumstances. If you notice that others are not wearing a face mask, remember that you may not know for what reasons they are not able to tolerate a mask. Be compassionate and do your own best.

Minnesota Department of Health's FAQ answer many more questions about masks. You can find it at <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/facecoverfaq.html>. If you need a print version, call Aitkin County Health & Human Services, at 218-927-7200 or 800-328-3744.

Wear a mask. Stay safe and stay well.

Chiang, C., Chiang, C., Chiang, C., & Chen, Y. (2020). The Practice of Wearing Surgical Masks during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 26(8), 1962. <https://dx.doi.org/10.3201/eid2608.201498>.