



Debunking Mask Myths: Why It's Important To Wear A Face Mask

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If everyone in the United States wore a mask, COVID-19 would be under control in four to eight weeks, said Robert Redfield, M.D., the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Because this virus is only months old (it was first seen in humans in China last December) what experts know about it changes based upon new and evolving research. What we definitively know now is that social distancing, frequent hand washing, and wearing cloth face masks in public can greatly reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Anyone over the age of two should wear a mask when in a public setting, when around other people who don't live in the same household, and especially when social distancing may be difficult. Children under the age of two, and those who have trouble breathing, who are incapacitated, or who are unable to remove a mask without assistance do not have to wear one, says the CDC. Everyone else should wear a mask.

"There is no risk to wearing a mask, but the reward is great," says Jennifer Burgess, D.O., a family medicine physician with Henry Ford Health System. "To do our part to get rid of this virus, we should all wear masks."

Here, Dr. Burgess shares the facts we know about masks—including why they're such an important tool to reducing COVID-19 transmission.

1. Wearing a mask will protect those around you from infection. COVID-19 is spread from person to person by respiratory droplets, which are largely projected when you cough, sneeze, talk and sing. Cloth face masks act as barriers, preventing those around you from inhaling these droplets. Even people who are asymptomatic (or who have no symptoms) can be infected with COVID-19 and spread it to others. "If you wear a cloth face mask, you can protect others from exposure to your droplets by 60% to 95%," says Dr. Burgess.

2. Wearing a mask will protect you from infection. It's not just others you are protecting—you are also protecting yourself when wearing a mask. "It will reduce your own exposure to other people's respiratory droplets by approximately 20% to 30%," says Dr. Burgess.
3. A mask won't be effective if it doesn't cover your nose and mouth. "It should extend from the bridge of your nose to below your chin," says Dr. Burgess. If it doesn't completely cover your nose or mouth, droplets can escape and potentially infect other people.
4. Masks should be washed after each use. To avoid contamination (which can happen if you touch it, set it down or just if you're out and about), throw your cloth mask in the washing machine at the end of each day or after each use, says Dr. Burgess. On that note, wash your hands before putting on your mask, and again after it is in place. Apply your mask using the strings—don't touch the part that covers your nose and mouth. (And don't touch your mask after it's on—if you must readjust on the go, use hand sanitizer beforehand.)
5. Wearing a mask will not inhibit breathing. "A mask does not prevent the wearer from breathing, and it does not reduce the amount of oxygen in your lungs," says Dr. Burgess. "We've looked at surgeons who scrub into surgery for eight hours at a time with masks on, and masks have had no impact on their oxygen levels or mental states."
6. Wearing a mask will not raise carbon dioxide levels. There's a rumor claiming that wearing a cloth face mask can raise your carbon dioxide levels, but it's simply not true. "Again, surgeons wearing masks for long surgeries do not have reduced oxygen intake or elevated carbon dioxide levels," says Dr. Burgess.
7. Social distancing is still recommended when wearing a mask. "While masks are effective, they are not 100% foolproof," says Dr. Burgess. Maintaining a distance of at least six feet between yourself and others adds an extra layer of protection. "And when you're not able to easily socially distance, like in the grocery store, masks become even more important," says Dr. Burgess. Although it's less likely, COVID-19 droplets can be absorbed via the eyes, which is another reason why social distancing is important, she adds.
8. You don't need to wear a mask outside if you're in a wide, open space. If you're going outside for a walk and the streets aren't crowded, there's no need to wear a mask. However, if you live in a populated city, or will be in an outdoor space with lots of other people, wearing a mask outside is recommended, says Dr. Burgess. It's a good idea for everyone to leave home with a mask, regardless of where they're going. "You might run into someone you know and want to talk, or a park may get unexpectedly crowded," says Dr. Burgess. "Be prepared with a mask at all times."
9. Wearing a mask won't weaken your immune system. "Another rumor I've heard is that wearing a mask will prevent your body from building immunity to colds or viruses, and that is absolutely not true," says Dr. Burgess. "Wearing a mask will not affect your immune system in the least. Your body will continue to work as it's meant to."
10. If you have claustrophobia, anxiety or asthma, there are tactics that can help you comfortably wear a mask. "These diagnoses are legitimate concerns and we don't want to minimize them," says Dr. Burgess. "Ask your doctor for tips. For example, you can practice wearing a mask for five minutes at home and then slowly increase the amount of time you wear it."
11. You should still wear a mask if you've had COVID-19 and recovered. "As of now, we don't know whether you can get COVID-19 again," says Dr. Burgess. "We don't know how long the antibodies protecting you from COVID-19 last, or if you'll have immunity afterward. So everyone should wear a mask, regardless of whether they've had COVID-19."