



IHPE Position Statement: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) - Face Masks

There is a lot of confusion about the efficacy of face masks exacerbated by media reporting, hearsay, and anxiety in the general population. IHPE believes that wearing a medical mask is one of the prevention measures that can limit the spread of certain respiratory diseases. However, the use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide an adequate level of protection, and other measures should also be undertaken.

We believe that urgent action should be taken to ensure that all frontline workers obtain adequate supplies of appropriate masks and other protective clothing; that active health promoters ensure that they provide education on correct procedures and the maintenance of protective measures. To this end IHPE provides some sources of helpful information.

1. World Health Organisation.

The WHO has given advice on face mask usage.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: When and how to use masks.

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>

(Accessed 23/03/2020)

Advice on the use of masks in the community, during home care and in healthcare settings in the context of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Interim guidance 19 March 2020.

[https://www.who.int/publications-detail/advice-on-the-use-of-masks-in-the-community-during-home-care-and-in-healthcare-settings-in-the-context-of-the-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)-outbreak](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/advice-on-the-use-of-masks-in-the-community-during-home-care-and-in-healthcare-settings-in-the-context-of-the-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)-outbreak)

(Accessed 23/03/2020)

This document provides rapid advice on the use of medical masks in communities, at home and at healthcare facilities in areas that have reported outbreaks caused by the 2019 novel coronavirus. It is intended for public health and infection prevention and control professionals, healthcare managers, healthcare workers and community health workers. It will be revised as more data become available.

One of the important points it makes is:

“Wearing a medical mask is one of the prevention measures that can limit the spread of certain respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. However, the use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide an adequate level of protection, and other measures should also be adopted.”

2. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

This CDC website has a section comparing respirators and facemasks *Frequently Asked Questions about Personal Protective Equipment*.
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-use-faq.html>

(Accessed 22/03/2020)

3. Information from the BBC

Can wearing masks stop the spread of viruses? (23 January 2020)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-51205344>

(Accessed 22/03/2020)

4. Information from SKY News

Coronavirus: Do masks protect you? Will summer save us? Busting COVID-19 myths. (Thursday 5 March 2020 11:44, UK)

<https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-do-masks-protect-you-will-summer-save-us-busting-covid-19-myths-11948121>

(Accessed 22/03/2020)

5. Information from research journals

There is a lack of evidence of the effectiveness of face masks. But this is not the same as “they don’t work”, merely that research into this is limited. The lack of research on face masks is reflected in varied and sometimes conflicting guidelines and policies.

For further information, below are some key references on the subject including a Cochrane Systematic Review.

Feng, S., et al. (2020) Comment. Rational use of face masks in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. Online March 20, 2020.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(20\)30134-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(20)30134-X)

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30134-X/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30134-X/fulltext#articleInformation)

Greenhalgh T. et al. (2020) What is the efficacy of standard face masks compared to respirator masks in preventing COVID-type respiratory illnesses in primary care staff? Oxford: University of Oxford.

<https://www.cebm.net/archives/covid-19/what-is-the-efficacy-of-standard-face-masks-compared-to-respirator-masks-in-preventing-covid-type-respiratory-illnesses-in-primary-care-staff>

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<https://academic.oup.com/cid/article/65/11/1934/4068747>

Vincent_M, Edwards_P. (2016) Disposable surgical face masks for preventing surgical wound infection in clean surgery. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2016, Issue 4. Art. No.: CD002929.

DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD002929.pub3.

https://www.cochrane.org/CD002929/WOUNDS_disposable-surgical-face-masks-preventing-surgical-wound-infection-clean-surgery

Raina M, Ahmad C. (2015) Facemasks for the prevention of infection in healthcare and community settings. *BMJ*; 350 :h694

<https://www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h694.long>

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<https://www.cadth.ca/use-surgical-masks-operating-room-review-clinical-effectiveness-and-guidelines>

Webster J, Croger S, Lister C, Doidge M, Terry M, Jones I. (2010) Use of face masks by non-scrubbed operating room staff: a randomized controlled trial. ANZ Journal of Surgery. 80(3):169-73.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1445-2197.2009.05200.x>

Belkin N. (2009) The standard for the surgical mask. American Journal of Infection Control. 37(3), 258–259.
[https://www.ajicjournal.org/article/S0196-6553\(08\)00751-7/fulltext](https://www.ajicjournal.org/article/S0196-6553(08)00751-7/fulltext)

Jefferson T, Foxlee R, Del Mar C, et al. (2008) Physical interventions to interrupt or reduce the spread of respiratory viruses: systematic review. BMJ. 336:77–80
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2190272/>

Romney M. (2001) Surgical face masks in the operating theatre: re-examining the evidence. Journal of Hospital Infection. 47: 251–256
[https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701\(00\)90912-5/fulltext](https://www.journalofhospitalinfection.com/article/S0195-6701(00)90912-5/fulltext)

Chamberlain G, Houang E. (1984) Trial of the use of masks in the gynaecological operating theatre. Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. 66(6):432-3.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2494468/>

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