



Public Health Brief

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Should You Be Buying and Wearing “Masks”?

This is the question I get asked most frequently with the anxiety about the spreading 2019 novel coronavirus. The short answer is an emphatic NO – It is not advisable or necessary at his time.

In much of Asia, you see and hear stories of people stocking up and wearing surgical masks, with supplies running low and resulting panic. The only place for wearing masks is in areas where the virus is circulating widely, and when worn by people who are currently infected with the virus.

The situation in China is very different than in the US. Here there are only 5 cases identified so far, and there is no evidence of any transmission to people even in close contact with them. Even as the numbers inevitably increase in the US, early and rapid identification and isolation of potential cases is the key to preventing spread. Infected persons should be the ones wearing masks when in public – not the rest of us. Wearing a surgical mask helps you prevent sharing your germs if you are sick.

Who were surgical masks designed for, and why? They are intended for healthcare workers (specifically surgical staff) so that their germs will not be passed on to the patients they are caring for. Not the other way around! So, there is no reason for members of the public to be wearing surgical masks to prevent infection. While they do protect from large respiratory droplets (a spray from a sneeze or mucus from a cough), they do not provide a seal around the face. Therefore, they don't protect from smaller particles, and are not effective in totally preventing coronavirus transmission. In fact, wearing a surgical mask will create a false sense of security.



Public Health

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What about the N-95 respirators that you can purchase at any hardware store? We do not recommend that the public wear them either. However, the CDC does recommend that healthcare providers wear N-95 respirators which filter at least 95% of airborne particles, when they are in contact with a patient infected with the novel coronavirus. In addition, healthcare staff wear gowns, gloves, and goggles to reduce their likelihood of infection. Healthcare staff are also regularly fitted for the N95 respirators, and there's a proper way to wear them to ensure that the mask fits snugly against the face. People with no medical training might wear it incorrectly. Plus, N95 respirators are quite uncomfortable to wear for more than 10-15 minutes.

So how should you protect yourself?

- Avoid contact with sick people.
- Stay home from work or school when sick.
- Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water for at least 30 seconds - frequently.
- If you have been to an area with known confirmed cases of the 2019 novel coronavirus in the last 14 days, and you develop a cough, shortness of breath, and fever, call your healthcare provider for instructions.
- If you have been in closed contact with a confirmed case, contact your healthcare provider for instructions.

If you develop “flu-like symptoms”, and you don’t fall into the above categories, you probably have the flu! Stay home, drink plenty of fluids, and contact your healthcare provider if you get sicker than you are comfortable with.

At this point in time, we do not recommend the use of masks for the public. We will continue to monitor this rapidly evolving situation and will keep you informed of any further developments that would change our recommendations.

For updates from the CDC, go to:

[CDC – Novel Coronavirus 2019 \(nCoV-2019\)](#)



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