

Masks – Version 2 last updated 19/07/2020

- As of today, Victoria has changed its stance on community use of masks and has now made the mandatory in public spaces. As such, I thought it important to update the last set of advice on masks previously uploaded to www.messunimelb.org/covid19. The original resource still contains important information on methods of spread (droplet precautions, fomites etc.) so I would still suggest reading over it
- Same disclaimer as last time – the information in this area is rapidly updating, so if in doubt refer to your government guidelines. I am not an infection control expert, however I have been trained in appropriate PPE wear several times as a medical student. If you have questions, please contact your GP.
- Why do we need to wear masks?
 - o The goal with community mask wearing is to decrease the rates of asymptomatic community spread. A recent paper¹ from the US found that the majority of transmission is occurring whilst people are asymptomatic, meaning that even if everyone who feels ill isolates the virus will continue to spread
 - o The goal of wearing masks in the community is different to the goal when in a health care setting.
 - In a health care setting, professionals are wearing PPE (personal protective equipment) to protect themselves from ill patients. As such, they require tighter fitting masks with a higher safety rating. Depending on the situation, this is either a surgical mask or a N95/P2 rated mask
 - In the community, wearing a mask is more about protecting those around you as well as protecting yourself. SARS-CoV-2 (the virus behind COVID19) spread via droplets which are generated when you cough, sneeze, talk, laugh, sing, basically any time you open your mouth. Wearing a mask catches these droplets before they have a chance to land on someone else, or onto a fomite (an object used to transmit droplets between people, for example a handrail).
 - o Wearing a mask has the potential to drastically cut down the transmission rate of COVID, however, similarly to vaccines the best effect is seen when the whole population is complying. The CDC director has said that “if everyone in the US wore masks, I think we could get this under control in the next 4-8 weeks”². The CDC also currently recommends everyone wear some kind of face covering³
- How to wear a mask
 - o There are many different kinds of face masks, but the basic principles are the same
 - o Before putting the mask on, make sure your hands are clean. Hand sanitiser is best!
 - o When putting the mask on, only hold the elastic/ties. Don’t touch the actual ‘body’ of the face mask if you can avoid it
 - o If you are using a disposable mask, you’ll notice one side is blue and the other is white. The white side goes on your face, the blue side faces outwards
 - o If your mask has it, mould the metal strip around the nose to make a snug fit
 - o If your mask feels a little loose, you can twist or tie a knot in the elastic loops to tighten
 - o Whilst wearing the mask, DO NOT touch the fabric over the face. If you need to adjust the mask, try and do so using the elastic/ties, or by just touching the nasal bridge and pulling up. Every time you touch your mask, make sure you sanitise your hands before and after (this is essential – you are at risk of contaminating yourself when adjusting the mask if your hands aren’t clean!)
 - o When taking your mask off, make sure you sanitise your hands before and after. Without touching the fabric on your face, grab the elastic/ties and remove from your face
 - If you’re using a single use mask – you should dispose of it immediately and perform hand hygiene
 - If you’re using a reusable mask – you should try and wash it after every use. Once you take it off, perform hand hygiene
 - o It’s essential that the mask covers both your nose and mouth – leaving your nose hanging out the top defeats the purpose.
 - o The points above are summarised in this short video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OABvzu9e-hw>

¹ Moghadas et al. “The implications of silent transmission for the control of COVID-19 outbreaks”, available at <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2020/07/02/2008373117>

² <https://www.statnews.com/2020/07/14/if-everyone-wore-mask-covid19-could-be-controlled-cdc-director-urges/>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/p0714-americans-to-wear-masks.html>

- If you're using a disposable mask and you take it off to eat or drink, you can't put it back on – you have to use a new one. This is due to the increased risk of self-contamination when putting on a used mask
- Face masks work best when the wearer doesn't have facial hair. Obviously, there are cases when the wearer may not be in a position to shave their face, however if it is a possibility then consider shaving regularly so that the mask is most effective
- If I do not have access to a mask, what else can I use?
 - Because the goal of community mask wearing is to catch droplets, you don't necessarily need a surgical mask. Anything that covers your mouth and nose is better than nothing. Especially for the first few weeks after mandatory mask wearing comes into force, it may be hard to find proper masks
 - You can buy disposable or reusable masks
 - You can make masks using any spare cloth/old clothes lying around. There are plenty of great YouTube videos showing you how (and it can be a great Zoom activity with friends)
 - Wrapping a scarf around your mouth and nose can also be a good thing to tie you over until you can get your hands on a mask (scarves tend to fall down and not cover the nose, which is there main issue with everyday use). If you're using a scarf, make sure you're washing it regularly and still using hand sanitiser when taking it on and off
- When should I wear a mask?
 - The new mandatory rule means that you should wear a mask at all times when leaving the house
 - This includes exercising, even if you're by yourself! If you're breathing heavily, you're going to be producing a lot more droplets so it's really important you've got a mask on
 - From personal experience, some masks are better than others for exercising in. When I go for runs (when I tend to get really out of breath), I've found a disposable mask is more comfortable than a cotton reusable one. For other activities, including cycling, I've found my cotton reusable one does the job just fine!
- Who should wear a mask?
 - Everyone should be wearing a mask when out in the community
 - Physically, there are no reasons why wearing a mask could be detrimental. Wearing a mask **does not** drop your oxygen saturations or increase your risk of other infections – hospital staff having been wearing masks for decades, often for many, many hours at a time, with no detrimental effects
 - If you have a respiratory condition and you are concerned, consider booking a telehealth appointment with your GP to discuss any concerns
 - There may be some people in our community who cannot wear masks for reasons other than physical health – if you think this may apply to you or someone you know, your GP is a great resource to turn to
- **Key points**
 - **MASK WEARING DOES NOT REPLACE HAND HYGEINE OR SOCIAL DISTANCING.** Masks play a role in reducing risk, but they go hand-in-hand with the other measures. For mask wearing to be effective, you must still maintain at least 1.5m between individuals and practice frequent hand sanitising.
 - **DON'T TOUCH THE FABRIC OF THE MASK.** When handling the mask, avoid touching the fabric. As much as you can, handle and adjust the masks using the elastic loops or ties. And once it's on your face, try and avoid touching it as much as you can
 - **THE MASK HAS TO COVER YOUR MOUTH AND NOSE.** If it only covers your mouth, you may as well not be wearing the mask in terms of efficacy
 - **KEEP SANITISING.** Every time, before and after touching the mask, make sure you sanitise your hands
 - **MASKS ARE SAFE.** There are no harms associated with mask use. They are an easy, low cost intervention that is incredibly effective when used well!