

The importance of wearing masks in curtailing the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Primary care workers are the first point of contact for patients. Therefore, it is critical for this group of workers to understand the significant role of personal protective equipment and the importance of adhering to proper donning, doffing, and discarding protocols in epidemic control. These measures are crucial in curtailing disease transmission and the overall containment of the contagion.

Keywords: Air-borne, corona virus, COVID-19, face mask, infection control, social distancing, virus

Introductory Statement

I was provoked to write this short piece, after I read that it was being touted that wearing masks offer little or no protection, against the corona virus. Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, many local overnight “experts” have surfaced; some speaking out of turn while others speaking when they ought not to. The problem with the latter is that they relate dangerous and unbridled opinions that will not only confuse the masses but create a greater public health risk by inciting errors of omission or commission; while compromising the adherence to official public health guidance.

This article will hopefully delineate any misunderstanding pertaining to the efficacy of wearing mask to mitigate against viral transmission and other infectious agents that opportunistically use the oropharyngeal route as the main orifice for disease spread.^[1-3] It highlights the significance of using face masks as a reasonable measure of reducing the risk of corona virus transmission. Primary care workers are the first point of contact for patients. Therefore, it is critical for this group of workers to understand the significant

role of personal protective equipment and the importance of adhering to proper donning, doffing, and discarding protocols in epidemic control.^[1,3] These measures are crucial in curtailing disease transmission and the overall containment of the contagion.^[1]

The Importance of Wearing Face Masks

Over the past few days, there has been a lot of debate on whether masks should be worn or not worn. Let me first commend the government for their proactive step, albeit late in my opinion, to mandate that masks be worn. If the wearing of masks gives a false sense of security then so too are the actions of washing hands, using hand-sanitizers, wearing gloves, and even the practice of social distancing, when practiced in isolation. The truth is, no single preventative action holds the golden key in disease prevention within the context of proper infection control. Each action contributes significantly to the process and complements the other in disease containment. The lack of protection of face masks is actually a notion touted in part by the World Health Organization (WHO) but with all due respect, the WHO has gotten it wrong more than once.^[3,4] A good example is whether or not the corona virus was airborne. Initially, the WHO stated that the corona virus was not transmittable through the air and later they confirmed that it was. What should guide our action and rather, proactions are the issues

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that uniquely affect our population and common sense practices. With infectious diseases being responsible for about 25% of the annual global deaths, public health system must engage every possible and viable preventative measure and epidemic control protocols to mitigate against disease transmission.^[2]

According to infectious disease expert and senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Amesh A. Adalja, MD, “Face masks can help protect against many respiratory infections that are spread through the droplet route, and that includes coronavirus and the flu.” Speaking to the basis of this recommendation, Dr. Adalja stated that viruses such as the corona virus can spread from an infected person to others through the air by coughing and sneezing or by touching a contaminated surface and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes prior to hand washing. When a face mask is worn, one can prevent those droplets from coming into contact with one’s face or mouth before dropping to the ground.^[3,4]

Proper Donning and Doffing

However, just as important as wearing the mask is the proper donning and doffing (placement and removal) of personal protective equipment (PPE). Perhaps this is where the emphasis should be on proper public education on the use of PPE. The efficacy of PPE is compromised when they are not appropriately used. It is critical to achieve an adequate seal to the face when masks are used.^[3,4]

Here are some useful tips related to wearing mask as recommended by the WHO:^[3]

- Before putting on a mask, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or preferably washing with soap and water.
- Cover mouth and nose with mask.^[3]
- Ensure that there are no gaps between your face and the mask.^[3]
- Avoid touching the mask while using it; if you do, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or preferably wash with soap and water.^[3]
- Replace the mask with a new one as soon as it is damp and do not re-use single-use masks.^[3]
- To remove the mask: remove it from behind (do not touch the front of the mask); discard immediately in a closed bin; clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or preferably wash with soap and water.^[3]

Conclusion

Finally, I cannot emphasize enough how important hand-washing is in disease prevention.^[2,4] Given the high level of contagiousness of the corona virus and its relatively illusive behavior, it is crucial that global public health system employ all appropriate disease prevention protocols to reduce the risk of disease transmission. This was a critical practice while I worked in Haiti during the disastrous earthquake in 2010 which gave rise to the awful cholera outbreak that claimed many lives. Likewise, COVID-19 is a severe and highly contagious disease.^[5] Its rapid geographical expansion,

and its the significant increase in incidence and prevalence can quickly overwhelmed health and public health services globally.^[5] We each, therefore, have a personal and collective responsibility to observe, practice, and maintain all standard hygienic protocols in this fight against this deadly viral pandemic.

A Quick Recap

1. PPE play a significant role in disease prevention.
2. Primary care physicians are the first line of contact and must adhere to all disease prevention protocols including the proper use of PPE.
3. Face masks can help protect against many respiratory infections that are spread through the droplet route, and that includes coronavirus and the flu.
4. Proper donning and doffing technique are also critical measure to prevent disease transmission.
5. The wearing of a face mask should be short-term to reduce the risk of hypoxia.
6. Face masks should be worn when in crowded areas or coming in contact with the sick.
7. Wear a face mask if you have flu-like symptoms, particularly if you are interacting with others. This practice helps to protect others from coming in contact with your secretions and droplets.
8. Wearing a face mask is not a standalone preventative practice against disease transmission.
9. No single preventative action holds the golden key in disease prevention within the context of proper infection control.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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