

Novel coronavirus COVID-19 and surgical-type masks

Issue:

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak raises questions about the effectiveness of the public using surgical-type masks to protect themselves against infection.

- Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans and causes respiratory illness. The virus can spread from person-to-person, but it is not yet fully understood how easily COVID-19 spreads between people.
- As investigations based on SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV have concluded that these coronaviruses are primarily spread through contact with contaminated surfaces and respiratory droplets, it is expected that the route of transmission of COVID-19 is also through contact and droplet spread.
- Masks should only be worn by people with symptoms of illness, or their direct caregivers. Community members who are not caring for sick people do not need to wear surgical-type masks.
 - People often wear masks incorrectly which creates a false sense of security. They may also contaminate themselves when putting masks on and taking them off.
 - The exception is those who are sick with respiratory symptoms. These people may be asked to wear a mask to protect those in close contact with them such as doctors, nurses, family members or caregivers in the home.
- The following two scenarios address use of surgical-type masks in the community.
 1. **(Protecting Others) People who are sick should stay home. However, if a sick person must leave the home (for example: to seek medical care), they should wear a surgical-type mask if they will be within 2 metres of other people.**
 - The mask traps the infectious droplets expelled through coughing and sneezing.
 - The mask must fit securely over the nose and mouth.
 - Avoid touching or adjusting the mask while it is being worn.
 - Remove mask by using appropriate technique (i.e., do not touch the front but remove the lace from behind).
 - After removal or whenever you inadvertently touch a used mask, clean hands by using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water if visibly soiled.
 - Replace a mask with a new, clean, dry mask as soon as it becomes damp/humid.
 - Do not re-use single-use masks and discard single-use masks after each use and dispose of them immediately upon removal.

- Only surgical-type masks are recommended (not cloth or other materials).
- Individuals who cannot tolerate a mask should rigorously apply respiratory hygiene, (i.e., cover coughs and sneezes and wipe nose with tissues. If tissue is unavailable, cover mouth and nose with an upper sleeve or elbow, but not with hands. Dispose of used tissues in a wastebasket lined with a plastic bag and immediately wash hands with soap and water).
- The sick person should attempt to keep a distance of 2 metres from others at all times.
- If the sick person requires further medical assessment, is unable to wear a mask and unable to travel by private vehicle to the hospital, they must be transported by ambulance. All health care providers, including paramedics, should be notified of the person's symptoms.

2. **(Protecting Self) People (e.g., family members who are caring for a sick person at home) should wear a surgical-type mask when within 2 metres of that person.**

- The mask prevents infected drops from landing on the caregivers' nose and mouth

The best way to protect yourself and your family from novel coronavirus

- Clean your hands frequently and often with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth unless hands have been cleaned.
- Sneeze and cough into a tissue, or your upper sleeve or elbow.
- If coughing or sneezing into a tissue, dispose of it immediately and clean your hands.
- Avoid contact with people who are ill or keep a distance of 2 metres from anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19.

References:

World Health Organization (WHO). Advice on the Use of Masks in the Community, During Home Care and in the Health Care Settings in the Context of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak: Interim guidance. (2020).

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC). Preventing MERS-CoV From Spreading to Others in Homes and Communities. (2015).