Mask use in the community during the COVID-19 pandemic

Updated April 7, 2020

Issue: There is a need for clear guidance regarding mask use by the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following summarizes the Region of Peel – Public Health’s stance on mask use by the general public.

- The COVID-19 virus is a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans and causes respiratory illness. The virus spreads from person-to-person through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

- We now know from studies that those who eventually develop COVID-19 symptoms (people who are pre-symptomatic) can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms.

- There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of mask use alone in reducing the transmission of COVID-19. However, with community spread in Peel and information on pre-symptomatic transmission, Peel Public Health supports the messages from the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada. Wearing a non-medical mask or a face covering, even if asymptomatic, is an additional measure that can protect others in situations where physical distancing is difficult to maintain (e.g., on transit, in grocery stores).

- It is important that the supply of medical masks be conserved as personal protective equipment (PPE) for those at highest risk of exposure to the virus (e.g., healthcare workers, caregivers of sick persons) or those who are already sick. Trillium Health Partners, Brampton Civic and the Region of Peel are all accepting donations of much-needed surgical and N95 masks.

The following scenarios address use of masks based on i) the mask type, and ii) the conditions for safe use of masks in different circumstances/settings:

1. (Medical masks) Frontline healthcare workers or caregivers of those who are sick should wear medical masks to protect themselves.
   - Medical masks prevent infected drops from landing on a health care worker or caregiver’s nose and mouth.
   - Medical mask must fit securely over the nose and mouth.
   - Avoid touching or adjusting the mask while it is being worn.
   - After removal or after touching 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.
   - Discard single-use masks after each use and dispose of them immediately upon removal.
   - Cloth (e.g., cotton or gauze) masks are not recommended under any circumstances in health care settings.
2. **(Medical masks)** Those who are sick should wear a *medical* mask if available, or an alternative face covering to prevent further transmission to others

- Medical masks trap the infectious droplets expelled through coughing and sneezing by sick persons.
- 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).
- Even when wearing a mask, a sick person should always attempt to keep a distance of 2 metres (or 6 feet) from others.

3. **(Non-medical masks)** Healthy individuals in the community may choose to voluntarily wear a *non-medical* mask (e.g., homemade fabric masks) to protect others.

- Masks alone will not prevent COVID-19 spread.
- It is important to consistently practice good hygiene (e.g., wash your hands, do not touch or rub your eyes) while wearing a mask and to follow advised public health measures (e.g., physical distancing 2m [or 6 feet] from others) to protect yourself and others.
- Wash your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water before, during and after wearing a mask.
- Wash and disinfect fabric masks, or discard and replace single-use masks with a new mask as soon as a mask gets damp.
- Cloth face coverings should *not* be placed on children under age two or on anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

**How to properly use a mask**

**Putting on a mask:**
1. Clean hands thoroughly with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
2. Cover the mouth and nose with mask. Make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask.

**Wearing a mask:**
3. Avoid touching the mask while using it. If you do, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
4. Continue to follow advised public health measures (e.g., physical distancing) and practice cough etiquette (e.g., covering coughs/sneezes)
5. As soon as the mask is damp, replace the single-use mask or disinfect/wash the fabric mask.

**Removing a mask:**
6. Remove the mask from behind (do not touch the front of mask - masks can be contaminated on the outside or when touched by your hands).
7. Disinfect or discard the mask immediately into a closed bin.
8. Clean hands with alcohol-based hand rub and soap and water, and put on a new/clean mask.

The pros and cons of homemade masks

Mask use, in combination with good hand hygiene, may prevent the spread of infection in community settings (MacIntyre, 2015¹). Mask use may be most beneficial to those in crowded settings (e.g., public transportation) and for high-risk individuals (e.g., older adults, immunocompromised people) (MacIntyre, 2015¹).

Both surgical and homemade masks (e.g., made from cotton t-shirts) can reduce the number of microorganisms expelled from coughing; however, surgical masks are more effective at blocking transmission than homemade masks which is why homemade masks should not be used in healthcare settings (Davies, 2013). While homemade masks can offer some protection, poor filtration and moisture retention of cloth masks, as well as the reuse of cloth masks may result in an increased risk of infection (MacIntyre, 2015²). In addition, the fit of homemade masks tends to be looser than surgical masks, resulting in less protection (Pai, 2008).


The best way to protect yourself and your family from COVID-19

- 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 (6 feet) from anyone showing symptoms of COVID-19.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) donations

The Region of Peel, Trillium Health Partners and William Osler Health System are accepting donations of unopened, unused and unexpired surgical masks as well as other PPE. These items can be donated at:

- 10 Peel Centre Drive, Brampton
- 7120 Hurontario St, Mississauga
- Brampton Civic Hospital, 2100 Bovaird Dr. East, Brampton (Receiving Dock #1)
- Mississauga Hospital, 100 Queensway, Mississauga, (Stores and Receiving Loading dock)

The Region will distribute the PPE collected to hospitals and long-term care facilities, public health workers, community service workers and shelters. For more information on how to donate, please visit:

- Region of Peel: peelregion.ca/coronavirus/donations/
- Trillium Health Partners https://trilliumgiving.ca/ppe/
- William Osler Health System: www.williamoslerhs.ca/ppdrive
References


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