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The No. 1 way to prevent coronavirus isn't wearing a face mask

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UPDATED ON: MARCH 3, 2020 / 12:25 PM / CBS NEWS

Editor's note: Health officials' views on wearing face masks have shifted as the outbreak spreads. On Friday, April 3, President Trump announced that the CDC now recommends Americans wear a "basic cloth or fabric mask," not a medical-grade mask, in public.

As fears over the coronavirus outbreak spread, thousands of Americans are clamoring to buy face masks in an effort to protect themselves, sending prices soaring and leading manufacturers like 3M to ramp up production. However, experts say stocking up on face masks is actually misguided — and there's a much simpler thing you could be doing right now to protect yourself.

There's a lot the general public likely doesn't realize about these masks — namely, that they are not the best way to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Wearing a mask is more for people already showing symptoms of coronavirus and their caregivers than for people trying to prevent it

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said it "does not recommend that people who are well wear a facemask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19," referring to

the disease caused by the new coronavirus. Rather, experts caution that putting on a face mask without proper fitting and training could actually increase your risk.

"If it's not fitted right, you're going to fumble with it," explained Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar before a House Appropriations subcommittee on Wednesday. "You're going to be touching your face, which is the No. 1 way you're going to get disease, is unclean hands touching your face."

On the other hand, if you are already coughing and showing symptoms of possible coronavirus illness, that's when wearing a mask could be helpful for protecting those around you.

"The data on the effectiveness of masks for preventing respiratory virus infections is not very clear," explains Dr. Andrew Stanley Pekosz of Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health. "The best data suggests that if you are ill and showing symptoms, wearing a mask can reduce the chances that you spread the virus to others."

Cloth surgical masks are not helpful at all

The common surgical mask you might be picturing in your head will not help you at all, Pekosz said.

A type called an N95 respirator mask, if properly fitted, can block large-particle droplets that may contain germs, but the FDA warns they cannot filter out "very small particles in the air that may be transmitted by coughs [or] sneezes."

"An N95 mask is the one that is most practical," Pekosz tells CBS News. "It stops 95% of particles of a certain size. ... There is a N99 mask, which blocks 99% of particles, but that mask is difficult to wear for long periods of time because it is hard to breathe through it."

Respirator masks are more expensive. The FDA also notes they are not designed to fit children or people with facial hair.

Even a good face mask isn't enough

"Masks shouldn't be considered to be the sole item that can protect you from infection, but it can be one of several things that can help you stay uninfected," said Pekosz.

"Wash your hands frequently. Practice social distancing — stay 5 feet away from people to avoid being close enough to be exposed to respiratory droplets from that person. More specific guidance will be given by the CDC soon, but those two things should be practiced by people on a daily basis to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses."

And he adds, "Get a flu shot — influenza has killed over 16,000 Americans this year and is still causing disease across the U.S."

You have to change masks every few hours

If you do go the mask route in spite of expert advice, it's important to note that face masks have a very specific lifespan. While there are some with longer lifespans or that have replaceable filters, the most common face masks on the market are disposable and single use. Each one of those is only good for a few hours.

"You want to change masks every few hours to make sure that they are functioning properly and aren't getting contaminated with virus particles on the outside," Pekosz tells CBS News. "It's not like putting one on protects you. One has to follow specific procedures to ensure you are using them effectively."

Buying face masks for personal use could cause a shortage at hospitals

"There is a limited supply of masks and while companies are increasing their production, demand is increasing at a very high rate," cautions Pekosz. "There will most likely be shortages of personal protective equipment at medical institutions and this may in part be driven by supplies being purchased by the general public. Emergency preparedness efforts will address supply chains, but there really is no reason for the general public to purchase large numbers of N95 masks."

The U.S. Surgeon General put it bluntly: "Seriously people — STOP BUYING MASKS!"

America's largest face mask manufacturer, Prestige Ameritech, is a small business based in Texas with only 100 employees. And while they have no problem fulfilling America's normal demand for face masks and respirators, they are now struggling to keep up.

Mike Bowen, the company's executive vice president, told CBS News that they now field orders of up to 100 million face masks and respirators a day. He also noted that while the company does not ship its products internationally, in the last 30 days it has sold between 1 million and 2 million masks to buyers who then sent them to others in China and Hong Kong.

This huge spike in personal orders is precisely what experts fear will cause a dangerous inventory shortage in American hospitals — a shortage that is entirely avoidable, given that there are no proven benefits to the general public wearing masks.

The best way to prevent coronavirus: Wash your hands

Experts say washing your hands is the best way to prevent the spread of infectious illnesses like coronavirus. That's because one of the most common ways infections spread is when people touch a contaminated surface and then touch their mouth or nose.

Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly. CBS News chief medical correspondent Dr. Jon LaPook points out that it's especially important to make sure that you scrub the soap into your fingertips because they are simultaneously the part of the hand most often neglected and the part of the hand most likely to touch your face and spread disease.

Soap and water is far more effective than hand sanitizer. If you're using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, you should make sure that it contains at least 60% alcohol.

Beyond that, the CDC advises that, whenever possible, you should also avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands, avoid contact with sick people, cover your mouth when you cough and sneeze, and disinfect objects and surfaces frequently.

First published on February 27, 2020 / 4:43 PM

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