

The Role of Wearing Masks and Social Distancing to Remain Healthy During the Covid-19 Pandemic *by Member Kathleen Larson*

Scientific research has determined that COVID -19 travels most efficiently through airborne transmission. Infection occurs most often during person to person contact via the respiratory tract. During airborne transmission, the infected person exhales secretions/droplets containing the virus into the air. These airborne droplets of the virus are then inhaled by the next individual. The virus then travels along the respiratory tract down to the lungs of the newly infected individual, where the disease process begins.

A second mode of viral transfer is through fomites. Fomites are materials containing droplets of the virus left on surfaces such as tables or door knobs. These viral secretions left on surfaces must remain viable and contain enough virus to infect the next person. The uninfected individual touches and picks up the infected secretions from a table, for example. Then the individual touches areas that will allow access to his respiratory tract, such as the nose, mouth or even eyes. It is not entirely clear how long fomites on various surfaces remain infectious; however, as a precaution, it is wise to wash hands as often as possible and to avoid touching one's face. It is also important to regularly disinfect surfaces that are touched often, such cell phones and light switches.

As airborne transmission of COVID -19 is the most efficient way that the virus infects individuals, a combination of WEARING A MASK and SOCIAL DISTANCING provides a significant barrier to disease transmission.

The quality of the mask and how it is handled directly affects the usefulness of wearing a mask. Along with wearing a mask, social distancing should be practiced if possible.

How to Effectively Wear a Mask:

- The mask should cover both the mouth and nose the entire time it is worn.
- If the mask has strings or straps, tie the top one behind the head and above the ears, and tie the second one below the ears. Use a bow or slipknot for easy removal.

- Press the metal nose strip firmly over the shape of the nose.
- The mask should fit as snugly as possible over the nose, cheeks, and chin minimizing air gaps. When you breathe, air can enter and leave through these gaps.
- It is helpful if the mask allows for easy breathing with what I call having an air pocket that does not compress the nostrils. An air pocket also minimizes moisture accumulation which dampens the mask. A moist or damp mask lowers its effectiveness.
- Don't pull the mask down to eat or drink for example and then pull it back up. This maneuver can contaminate your face.
- Once the mask is being used, do not touch the front or face of the mask, which could be contaminated. Do any adjusting with the strings or bands.
- It is best not to remove the mask until you return home where you can remove and discard it properly.
- Wash or sanitize your hands and then remove the mask by the ties or bands.
- Cloth masks can be placed directly into the laundry. Other masks need to be cleansed, or disposed of where they will not be touched.
- Wash your hands thoroughly.

How to Practice Social Distancing:

Social distancing, also called “physical distancing,” means keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home. To practice social or physical distancing:

- Stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arms’ length) from other people.

- Do not gather in groups.
- Stay out of crowded places and avoid mass gatherings.
- Limit close contact with others outside your household in indoor and outdoor spaces. Since people can spread the virus before they know they are sick, it is important to stay away from others when possible, even if you—or they—have no symptoms. Social distancing is especially important for people who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

Please Note: Transmission of the virus can occur both indoors and outdoors, but INDOOR TRANSMISSION IS MUCH MORE COMMON, since concentrations of viral aerosols end up much higher indoors. As William Schaffner, Professor of Preventive Medicine at Vanderbilt University notes:

"This virus really likes people being INDOORS IN AN ENCLOSED SPACE FOR PROLONGED PERIODS OF CLOSE FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT... It's people coming together in groups that matters."

So, in other words...avoid indoor gatherings in an enclosed space for prolonged periods of close face-to-face contact. Masks and social distancing are NOT ADEQUATE PROTECTION in this type of a setting.

For more information on how to keep safe during the Covid-19 pandemic click on the CDC link below. It provides comprehensive information on how to avoid infection:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/index.html>