

National Public Health Emergency Team

11 June 2020

Consideration of WHO guidance regarding facemasks in the context of COVID-19 and the use facemasks in the community

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Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

Background

On 1 May the NPHET recommended the use of face-coverings in the community; guidance was subsequently developed by the HPSC to support this recommendation and the use of masks by the general public.

The Department of Health's quantitative tracking report indicates that, currently, 28% of the population report wearing face-coverings; 84% report that they would be willing to wear these coverings but many are looking for more clarity on the appropriate use of these coverings.

On 5 June 2020, the World Health Organisation published updated guidance regarding the use of facemasks in the context of COVID-19 (see attached).

This guidance notes that

- The use of masks is part of a comprehensive package of the prevention and control measures that can limit the spread of certain respiratory viral diseases, including COVID-19.
- Masks can be used either for protection of healthy persons (worn to protect oneself when in contact with an infected individual) or for source control (worn by an infected individual to prevent onward transmission).
- The use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide an adequate level of protection or source control, and other personal and community level measures should also be adopted to suppress transmission of respiratory viruses.
- Whether or not masks are used, compliance with hand hygiene, physical distancing and other infection prevention and control (IPC) measures are critical to prevent human-to-human transmission of COVID-19.

In the context of updated information on transmission from symptomatic, pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic people infected with COVID-19, this guidance differs from the previous versions in that it provides

- New guidance on the targeted continuous use of medical masks by health workers working in clinical areas in health facilities in geographical areas with community transmission of COVID-19;
- Updated guidance and practical advice for decision-makers on the use of medical and non-medical masks by the general public using a risk-based approach;
- New guidance on non-medical mask features and characteristics, including choice of fabric, number and combination of layers, shape, coating and maintenance.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to consider the WHO guidance in the context of the current recommendations in place regarding the use of facemasks among the asymptomatic, non-vulnerable general public in Ireland.

WHO Recommendations on the use of facemasks in the community

The updated guidance notes that the widespread use of masks by healthy people in the community

setting is not yet supported by high quality or direct scientific evidence and there are potential benefits and harms to consider (see below).

- However, taking into account the available studies evaluating pre- and asymptomatic transmission, a growing compendium of observational evidence on the use of masks by the general public in several countries, individual values and preferences, as well as the difficulty of physical distancing in many contexts, WHO has updated its guidance to advise that to prevent COVID-19 transmission effectively in areas of community transmission, governments should encourage the general public to wear masks in specific situations and settings as part of a comprehensive approach to suppress SARS-CoV-2 transmission.
- The guidance advises decision-makers to apply a risk-based approach focusing on the following criteria when considering or encouraging the use of masks for the general public.
- The guidance notes that the use of medical masks in the community may divert this critical resource from the health workers and others who need them the most. In settings where medical masks are in short supply, medical masks should be reserved for health workers and at-risk individuals when indicated.
- The guidance states that decision makers advising on type of non-medical mask should take into consideration the following features of nonmedical masks: filtration efficiency (FE), or filtration, breathability, number and combination of material layers used, shape, coating and maintenance. As part of this, the guidance notes that the ideal combination of material for non-medical masks should include three layers as follows:
 1. an innermost layer of a hydrophilic material (e.g. cotton or cotton blends);
 2. an outermost layer made of hydrophobic material (e.g., polypropylene, polyester, or their blends) which may limit external contamination from penetration through to the wearer's nose and mouth;
 3. a middle hydrophobic layer of synthetic non-woven material such as polypropylene or a cotton layer which may enhance filtration or retain droplets.
- The guidance recommends that, where masks are recommended for the general public, the decision-maker should:
 1. clearly communicate the purpose of wearing a mask, where, when, how and what type of mask should be worn
 2. explain what wearing a mask may achieve and what it will not achieve, and communicate clearly that this is one part of a package of measures along with hand hygiene, physical distancing and other measures that are all necessary and all reinforce each other.

Recommendation

While noting the WHO guidance with regard to the ideal combination of material for a fabric facemask, the NPHET recommends that the focus in the first instance should be on increasing compliance with the current recommendations and HPSC guidance with regard to the use of facemasks by the general public in retail outlets, on public transport and in other public locations in which it is difficult to maintain social distancing or where this distance cannot be guaranteed.

As such, the NPHET recommends the development and implementation of a national communications campaign to communicate to the public

- who should wear face coverings

- in what settings
- how to wear and remove face coverings correctly.

It is intended that this campaign will launch in the week commencing the 15 June.