



Public Health Brief

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Health Officer **Strongly Encourages** Use of Face Coverings

As California and Alpine County began reopening in earnest this week, the discussions regarding the use of face coverings has become more heated and political rather than being based on science. I will readily admit that the science is incomplete, changing, and not without disagreement. But here are the "Cliff's Notes" as we understand the evidence today.

How do face coverings help to fight COVID19?

Face coverings are used to block the release of droplets and aerosols from the nose and mouth when someone sneezes, coughs, or talks. When infected people cough or sneeze, droplets teeming with live virus particles are expelled out to about 6 feet before they fall due to gravity. This is believed to be the primary means of transmission. When infected people talk, smaller aerosol droplets can remain hanging in the air for hours, especially in indoor spaces with limited ventilation. Persons with symptoms of course should not be out!

How effective are face coverings?

Many factors influence how well they work to prevent the release of these particles. Suffice it to say, they certainly block many of the particles, and slow the speed of those that manage to get through. The main rationale for use is to protect others from those who are infected, including those who have no symptoms, those who have not yet developed symptoms, and those with symptoms. If a majority of people wear face coverings, evidence shows that upcoming waves of illness will be flattened, deaths prevented, and our healthcare system will be able to efficiently function.

Do they protect the wearer?

Somewhat, although the main reason for wearing them is the protect others, not the wearer.



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When should face coverings be worn?

Face coverings are only part of the “body armour” that one should employ during this time. The single most important is social distancing. That means staying at least 6 feet away from others not in your household, and especially if you are high risk, staying home! Businesses are permitted to operate with significant modifications. Handwashing remains critically important, as is keeping your hands away from your face as much as possible.

Face coverings should be worn whenever you are unable to maintain at least 6 feet of separation between you and others, especially when indoors with limited ventilation. Incidental passing of someone in a hallway, aisle, or trail should not result in an exposure, which is typically thought of as close contact within 6 feet for 10-15 minutes or more.

Why don't I mandate the use of face coverings?

- A mandate is unenforceable, and therefore will not result in behavior change.
- A mandate runs the risk of confrontation between those seeking to comply and those refusing.
- However, businesses are able to mandate the use of face coverings by employees and customers on their own (“No shoes, no shirt, no masks”) and deny service if they so choose.

Conclusion:

Given our reopening which increases the risk of the introduction of the virus into our community, I am strongly encouraging the wearing of face coverings by all, especially when indoors, when unable to keep 6 feet of distance between persons from outside of your household, and by persons at high risk of serious infection and death. I believe an educational approach and encouragement will be more effective and acceptable than a mandate in normalizing this behavior change. I want to emphasize that each of us taking personal individual responsibility for our behavior is much more important than any policy that I could possibly issue in protecting ourselves, our families, and our community.

For those of you who wish to read more in-depth discussion of these issues:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340603522_Face_Masks_Against_COVID-19_An_Evidence_Review

<https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/covid-19/podcasts-webinars/special-ep-masks>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>

<https://covid19.ca.gov/>

Note: Alpine County has one laboratory confirmed case of COVID19 infection. Extensive testing in the last few weeks has not uncovered any further positive cases, although final results are not all in. Testing will continue.



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