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## Covid-19: Is wearing facemask necessary?

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**By: Dr Lee Pei May**

After close to two months of Movement Control Order (MCO), the government decided to implement a more relaxed MCO, namely Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). People can now return to work, travel with a maximum of 4 people in a car beyond 10km, make non-essential trips such as dining in a restaurant, and perform many other activities that were prohibited during MCO. Though more freedom is granted under CMCO, people should be aware that the virus is still lingering around and we are still exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. As such, the easing of MCO does not equal to the return to normalcy. Instead, the whole society should raise its alert level and contribute to stopping the contagion of Covid-19. So, a pertinent question to be asked here is: What can we do to reduce the risk of infecting ourselves and others?

Besides regular hand washing and maintaining at least 1 meter apart from others, it is absolutely necessary to wear a face mask when you are in public and crowded places. While the World Health Organisation (WHO) does not make wearing mask compulsory, many countries around the world began to realise the importance of

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facemask in slowing the spread of the disease. Countries such as South Korea, the Czech Republic and Poland advised their citizens to wear face masks when they are with others.

There have been conflicting opinions on whether face masks can be a useful tool to prevent the spread of the disease. Those that disagree claim that wearing face masks creates a false sense of security to the wearer. A closer look at such argument saw its flaws. As the virus is transmitted by droplets coming out of the mouths, the head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention pointed out that the biggest mistake people made was not wearing face masks in public. He joined the call in urging global health authorities to recommend the broader use of the face mask for the general population.

This is because the latest data indicates that almost a third of Covid-19 patients are asymptomatic yet they can be contagious. This means that a person with Covid-19 may not display any symptom and can go around infecting others. Without getting tested, it is challenging to discern between those who are well and unwell. As such, wearing a face mask would undoubtedly help to prevent people from passing the virus to others.

A glance into history reminds us of how face masks were among the useful tools to curb an epidemic. Dr Wu Lien Teh, who was born in Penang in 1879 and studied medicine in Cambridge was summoned to lead the fight against Manchurian Pneumonic plague of 1910-1911. This disease was deadly as it killed almost all who had contracted, with tens of thousands of deaths. By performing an autopsy on one of the victims, Dr Wu concluded that the plague spreads through the air, which contradicted the conventional belief that plague could only be transmitted by rats or fleas.

Using several layers of gauze, cotton and cloth, Dr Wu created a precursor to what is known as the N95 mask, which is used widely today by healthcare practitioners. His invention appeared to put the plague under control yet some doctors were sceptical of its usefulness. One French doctor who questioned the efficacy of the mask died days later after treating plague patients at the hospital without wearing a face mask.

Soon enough, many quickly adopted face mask-wearing-culture and production of the mask was ramped up to meet the needs. Dr Wu's masks received international coverage and when the Spanish flu happened in 1918, companies worldwide began to develop similar masks to prevent the contagion of the flu. While wearing face masks alone could not help to curb Covid-19, when combined with other preventive measures such as regular hand washing and maintaining social distances, it is certainly much more effective.

However, it is not advisable for people to wear a face mask when doing outdoor exercises such as running or cycling as it is not easy to breathe in. This is especially so for people who have difficulty in breathing. Having said that, it is a

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duty of everyone to keep local transmissions to a minimum. Wearing face mask to protect yourself and others is the least we can do apart from washing hands and observing social distances in our concerted efforts against Covid-19.

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