

Surgical masks vs fabric masks, what's better?

We asked an expert



SOURCE: UNSPLASH/ENGIN AKYURT

BY: [HANNAH KINGSTON](#) JULY 31, 2020

As all Victorians prepare to start wearing face masks from this weekend, there seems to be conflicting information about the efficacy of wearing a surgical mask versus a fabric mask to lower the transmission rate of coronavirus.

When it comes down to it, any form of a mask is better than none, but the number of layers in the makeup of your mask will determine whether or not it can offer you adequate protection, according

to [Dr Rohit Modak](#), a board-certified infectious disease specialist with Virginia Hospital Center Physician Group.

“Surgical masks do work better,” says Dr Modak.

“They have two layers to them, which works by blocking viral transmission, and also by creating an electric static charge, i.e. not allowing viral particles to get past it. Additionally, they are generally more breathable, and comfortable to wear for prolonged periods of time.”

Last week, Melburnians had to scramble to get face coverings or risk of a \$200 fine, and [Victorians in regional areas will soon need to do the same](#). The government messaging says anything from a surgical mask to a scarf is fine as long as someone’s mouth and nose are covered while outside of the home, unless they fall under an [approved category to not wear a mask while in public](#).

Dr Modak says cloth masks do work “if they are the proper fit”.

“Most cloth masks these days are made with two levels of fabric, so they also create this static charge to block the virus,” he says.

“Cloth masks tend to get hot and are not as comfortable for longer periods of time so the user is more likely to wear them improperly, or even take them off entirely.”

When it comes to choosing a mask, whether it’s a disposable surgical mask or reusable fabric mask, it’s important to ensure there is more than one layer so that you are fully protected.

The public has seen some conflicting instructions around wearing face masks; in Melbourne for instance, it wasn’t previously recommended to wear a mask but now it is a mandatory practice. Dr Modak says over the past six months as health professionals, scientists and researchers have learned more about the virus, recommendations have changed to meet the demands of the pandemic.

“Initially, we didn’t know exactly how this virus spread, and we wanted to conserve supplies for front line medical workers,” he says.

“With the advent of cloth masks that people could even make at home, universal masking became a much more feasible policy.”

While recommendations around the wearing of face masks have changed over the past few months, and in different parts of the world, Dr Modak says mask wearing will become a vital exercise for the lowering and eventual eradication of the virus:

“I think it is vital for the public to wear masks. They can effectively stop the spread of COVID-19. They prevent the spread of the virus from an infected patient. We now believe that even asymptomatic patients can spread the virus, so if everyone is masked, then we are blocking the virus at its source!”

Dr Modak also points to another key function of a surgical mask and or fabric mask: they prevent people from touching their face, which is one of the key ways that people become infected with COVID-19.

“Most people don’t think they rub their face, and most people are wrong about this! Wearing a mask will block this auto-inoculation,” he says.

“Finally, wearing a mask will prevent the inhalation of viral particles. Surgical masks and cloth masks are not airtight, so the wearing of a mask is more about protecting others than yourself; however, it will block some of the viral particles, and therefore offer some protection.”

More than 20 US states have issued orders for face masks to be worn while in public places and Dr Modak says this has made a drastic difference to transmission rates, in the absence of a cure or vaccine.

“Masks have made an absolute difference in lowering transmission rates, says Dr Modak, who is based in Virginia.

“We have been dealing with this pandemic for 6 months. The tools we have in our arsenal to control COVID-19 are hygiene, screening and contact tracing, social distancing and masking. For the general public, social distancing and masking are the keys to preventing spread.”

August 19th is a date that looms for most Melburnians who are wondering if it will actually be the end of the current six-week stay-at-home orders. There’s also a question mark over whether or not the wearing of face masks will become a mandatory practice into the future.

Dr Modak says: “I don’t think what we are seeing now will become the new normal, but I also don’t think that we will go back to what things were like one year ago. I suspect there will be some masking always at hospitals, in grocery stores, and at large gatherings. I don’t think we will mask in social situations with family and friends. Perhaps what we commonly see in Asian countries with people masking in public and around strangers will become the new norm across the world.”