

Masks: an important defence against COVID-19

This week the Victorian Government has asked everyone who lives in metropolitan Melbourne and the Mitchell Shire to wear a face covering when they leave home to reduce the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

In the Mount Alexander Shire, and indeed any region of Victoria other than the Mitchell Shire or metropolitan Melbourne, we are being asked to wear one when we leave home and social distancing is not possible. For example when we're shopping, catching public transport or visiting the doctor.

The wearing of masks was not advocated in the early stages of the pandemic, but Susan Wyatt, who is currently overseeing infection control at Castlemaine Health, says we now understand more about the virus and what will make a difference.

"New research around face masks specific to COVID-19 has shown they have an effect in reducing transmission," she says.

"The best way to protect against COVID-19 is still staying home when you feel unwell, keeping 1.5 metres apart, washing your hands often and coughing or sneezing into your elbow or a tissue."

"Masks are a second line of defence when we can't maintain social distance. They add a helpful, additional protective physical barrier, but social distancing is still the number one thing."

What kind of mask?

Any face covering needs to cover both your nose and mouth. A mask can be disposable or a re-useable one made of cloth.

Disposable masks need to be discarded after each use. If you're going to make your own or purchase a cloth mask the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recommends they are made of three layers.

- An outer layer of water-resistant fabric like polyester or polypropylene (eg. reusable 'green' shopping bags or exercise clothing)

- A middle layer of a cotton polyester blend or polypropylene (eg. clothing or more of the green shopping bag material from the outer layer)

- An inner layer of water-absorbing fabric like cotton

- Ear loops made of elastic, string or cloth strips.

Important

- Check the tag to confirm the type of material

- Make sure all materials are intact, have not worn too thin or have holes in them

- A reversible cloth mask is not advisable.

- Facial hair will compromise the effectiveness of any mask and may not provide protection.

- Remember, any face mask or covering is better than none. This includes a scarf or bandana.

"At Castlemaine Health, along with all our other measures including frequent

cleaning of high touch areas and precautions for any transfers from other hospitals, the wearing of masks is now compulsory for all care staff," says Susan.

"While we are closed to visitors, if you are coming in for an X-ray, surgery or a pre-arranged and authorised visit on compassionate grounds, you will be given a hospital mask to wear for the duration of your visit."

"If you arrive wearing a home made mask you will be asked to remove this and use the hospital mask to ensure the safety of our staff and others. This will be a requirement for entry into the health service," Susan says.

"Protecting our patients, residents and our broader community is our priority and adopting these new precautionary measures adds another line of defence against the virus."

If you would like more information about masks and the new guidelines for Victoria visit www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus or www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus



Infection control practitioner Susan Wyatt.

How to wear a cloth mask safely

<p>Inspect the mask for any holes or dirt</p>	<p>Adjust the mask to your face so it fits snugly</p>	<p>Cover your nose and mouth</p>	<p>Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth at all times</p>
<p>Remove the mask by the strings or ear loops</p>	<p>Store the mask in a plastic, resealable bag until you can wash it</p>	<p>Wash your hands before and after you wear your cloth mask</p>	<p>Make sure your mask does not have a valve. This can result in breathing out a virus if you are infected</p>

The recommendation to wear a face mask does not apply to children, individuals with breathing difficulties, and those who have physical conditions that make it difficult to wear a mask.

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