COVID-19: The ultimate guide to face masks

Living Well | Sue Hewitt | Posted on 19 July 2020

Face masks to become mandatory in Victoria. Here's everything you need to know.

As Victoria steps up the [fight against the spread of COVID-19](#), the state government is mandating that all adults who live in metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire wear a face mask when outside the home. This includes when at work (if it can't be done from home), on public transport, at the supermarket or even walking the dog. Adults living outside those stage-three restriction areas are also urged to wear a mask or alternative face covering when outside the home – especially in places where maintaining 1.5 metres' social distance is difficult – although this is not mandatory outside the lockdown zones.

Acceptable coverings include surgical masks and cloth masks, as well as scarves, bandanas or other materials, which do offer some protection to droplets that may carry the virus. Anyone not complying can be fined $200.

Victorians are being urged to wear masks in public places where they might not be able to maintain a safe social distance, such as when grocery shopping or using public transport.

While masks are no substitute for vigilant social distancing and hand hygiene, Victoria's chief health officer Brett Sutton says they can help reduce community transmission of the virus by up to 60 per cent.

Premier Daniel Andrews says, "Staying at home if you feel unwell is still the best way to slow the spread of coronavirus but wearing a cloth mask provides an additional physical barrier, adding one more layer of protection for you and those around you."

He also urged Victorians to get used to this new normal. "We're going to be wearing masks in Victoria and potentially in other parts of the country for a very long time," he said.

The government's recommendations reflect the latest

evidence from international medical experts and respond to surging community transmission in Victoria. Melbourne University epidemiologist Professor Tony Blakely has conducted modelling that shows wearing masks will bring Victoria closer to a zero transmission rate in a shorter time. "All masks help, some more than others," he says. And crucially, to be effective, they must be worn and handled correctly.

What are the new face mask rules in Victoria?

When do the new mask rules come into place?

From this Thursday 23 July, face coverings will be mandatory when outside the home for residents of metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire who are high-school age or above. Anyone not complying can be fined $200. Acceptable coverings include surgical masks and cloth masks, as well as scarves, bandanas or other materials, which do offer some protection from droplets that may carry the virus.

Who needs to wear a mask or face covering?

Anyone over the age of 12 living in metropolitan Melbourne or Mitchell Shire. Younger children are not required to wear a mask.

When do I need to wear a mask?

Whenever outside the home for the four permissible reasons (whether it be for work or study, exercise, caregiving or receiving, or shopping for essentials). The government has advised that no matter your reason for being outside the home, you must carry your face covering at all times to wear when you can.

Are there any exemptions?

You will not be required to wear a mask if you are a teacher, child under 12 years of age, for professional reasons (ie, if it will hinder your ability to do your job), or if you have a medical reason. You will be required to remove your mask when entering bank premises.

What if I am caught in public not wearing a face covering?

Anyone not complying can be fined $200. Businesses may face tougher penalties.

Do I need to wear a mask if I am driving in my car alone?

No, you do not need to wear a mask when in the car, but you must put one on when you get out.

What about at work?

Yes, you must wear a mask at work where it is practical to do so. Exemptions include teachers and other professions which may make the wearing of masks

difficult, such as call-centre operators. Masks must be worn even if you are able to apply proper social distancing from your colleagues (ie, on a construction site). The advice remains that if you can work from home, you must. Employers discouraging the use of masks will face hefty penalties.

Do I need to wear a mask when jogging?

No, it is not mandatory while jogging, but you must carry one with you and put it on as soon as you finish your run if your end point is not your home.

What about cycling?

No, it is not mandatory but, as with jogging, you must carry one with you and put it on as soon as you finish cycling if your end point is not your home.

What about walking the dog?

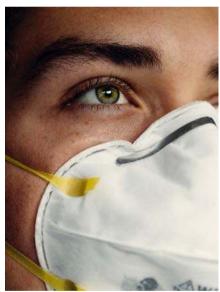Yes, you need to wear a mask when you are out and about.

What about in the bank?

For security reasons, you will be required to remove your mask when entering bank premises.

I live in regional Victoria. Do I need to wear a mask?

While face coverings are not mandatory for people living

outside of Melbourne and Mitchell Shire, residents living in regional Victoria are still urged to wear a mask in situations where maintaining 1.5 metres' distance might be difficult.

Disposable, respirator (N95, P2) and reusable cloth masks are the three most common types of mask available.

What type of mask should you choose and how should you handle it?

There are three main types of mask.

N95 or P2 respirator masks

Not recommended for the general public, these tight-fitting respirators filter out a high percentage of even the smallest airborne particles and droplets. As such they offer the highest standard of protection for health professionals and other essential workers on the COVID-19 frontline. In particular, members of the public should avoid N95 masks fitted with an exhalation valve as these offer lesser protection for those nearby.

Disposable surgical masks

Disposable surgical masks are more readily available and less expensive to buy than the N95 masks (which are not recommended for general public use). Looser-fitting surgical masks provide barrier protection against droplets that may carry the virus. Most surgical masks do not filter small particles from the air and do not offer airtight protection for the wearer due to leakage around the edges of the mask when the wearer inhales. However, they do help prevent transmission from the wearer to

others in the community as well as providing some protection for the wearer against airborne droplets. These masks cannot be reused and must be carefully removed and disposed of after each use.

Reusable cloth masks

Either bought or homemade, cloth masks offer a less expensive and more sustainable alternative, which can be washed after each use and reused time and time again. Like surgical masks, they offer barrier protection but will not filter out small air particles and will not offer airtight protection. Head of Melbourne University's chemical and biomedical engineering school, professor Sandra Kentish, says cloth masks can be made very simply at home and, like surgical masks, are effective in blocking airborne virus droplets. However, they must be washed thoroughly in hot water after each single use and dried either on a clothesline in sunlight or in a hot dryer to kill the virus.

Face coverings including homemade masks, scarves and bandanas

can offer some protection against COVID-19.

How to wear a mask correctly

Regardless of the type of mask you wear, Sandra says it will only provide effective protection if worn and removed correctly. She says a mask must fully cover the nose, mouth and chin, without any gaps between the side of the mask and face. Many health workers shave off their beards to ensure masks are as airtight as possible, she says.

"It's important never to touch the front of the mask when you're wearing it or taking it off; the front of the mask captures [the virus] and you'll get it on your fingers," Sandra says.

Masks should always be removed using the straps, without touching the mask itself.

Some people report experiencing skin irritation, inflammation and pimples after wearing a mask. Australian dermatologist Dr Li-Chuen Wong says if a particular area of the skin is irritated, it might suggest a contact allergy to either dyes or adhesives found in the mask or detergents used to wash the mask. She also says to make sure that the mask is fitted properly and not causing a friction dermatitis.

Avoid wearing occlusive foundation/makeup and harsh

skincare products that will only exacerbate the problem and apply a scent-free moisturiser every few hours to protect the skin.

If the problem persists, she says to see your local doctor or dematologist.

Face mask 101: Professor Sandra Kentish's top tips for maximising protection

- Clean your hands with alcohol-based sanitiser or soap and water before touching the mask.
- Tie the mask behind your head and neck or slip loop straps around your ears.
- Adjust the mask to cover your nose, mouth and chin without leaving any gaps on the side. An airtight fit may be impossible for people with beards.
- Don't touch the mask when you're wearing it.
- Clean your hands before removing mask.
- Remove it using the side straps and pull it away from your face. Never touch the front of the mask to remove it.
- Keep the mask away from you and any surfaces after it's removed.
- If it's a disposable mask, hold it by the straps and discard it in a closed bin, then wash your hands.
- Do not re-use single-use masks.
- If it's a reusable fabric mask hold it by the straps and put it in the washing machine on a long hot cycle to kill the virus, then wash your hands.

- Dry reusable masks on a hot cycle in a dryer or on an outdoor clothesline in the sun.
- Don't wear a mask that's difficult to breathe through, it will be tempting to loosen it, making it ineffective.

How to make a cloth mask at home

The Department of Health and Human Services says wearing cloth masks in public areas where physical distancing is not possible can help reduce the rate of community transmission of the virus. The department has published the following guide to making fabric masks. Click here for the DHHS step-by-step diagrams.

1. Cut three 25-centimetre x 25-centimetre rectangles of fabric – a cotton fabric for the inner layer, a fabric blend such as cotton/polyester for the middle layer and a water-resistant fabric like a polyester or nylon for the outer layer.
2. Stack the three rectangles in the order described above, then fold over the edges of the fabric on the long side to create 1-centimetre hems. Stitch down the folded long sides.
3. Fold over the edge of the short sides to create a 1-centimetre hem, then stitch.
4. Thread elastic or fabric ties through the 'tubes' of the side hems.
5. Knot the elastic ends tightly.
6. To improve the fit of your mask you can add a nylon