

I should start by emphasizing that I'm not against masks. However...

The World Health Organization advises healthy people not to wear masks. The Centers for Disease Control recommends the wearing of masks by asymptomatic people, but stops short of advising a mandatory policy. Public Health England (their version of the CDC,) advises against masks for healthy people. There are reasons for the reluctance of leading public health agencies to call for mandatory mask rules.

The actual evidence regarding the idea that masks are effective in preventing the spread of Covid-19 is scant and contradictory. Those studies that have been done test only the physical ability of different kinds of mask materials to block the movement of the Covid-19 virus, under laboratory conditions. We quickly learned that masks available to the public are ineffective at blocking the Covid-19 virus when inhaling, and so don't protect the wearer, but might retard the movement of the virus when exhaling or coughing, and so might protect other people from the wearer. And so, people began to support the idea that even though we don't yet have a scientific basis for policy, wearing masks can't hurt, and might help, so why not require them? And then, of course, the subject quickly devolved into a ridiculous political spat, with those who don't care about their fellow human beings and don't understand science versus those who don't care about human liberty.

The problem is that no study has yet been done regarding how human beings actually use masks outside laboratories. In the real world, masks may, in fact, conflict with more important protective behaviors, increase the risk of infection for wearers, and have secondary negative consequences for public health. The following article provides a brief summary, from the perspective of frontline doctors, of the potential downsides to wearing masks (a topic which seems to have been almost completely ignored in the general discussion to this point): <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m1435/rr-40>

We do have strong consensus that the most important things we can do to protect ourselves and prevent the spread of the virus are the big three: distance ourselves from others in public; sanitize hands frequently; and above all, avoid touching our own faces. These are all low cost, high benefit strategies. However, if masks aren't properly handled, they can undercut these objectives, and remarkably few people seem to be handling them properly. People frequently and unconsciously tug, pull up, and adjust their masks, which are uncomfortable, particularly for those with facial hair, sensitive skin, or glasses. Masks tend to direct breath into the eyes, which fogs glasses and increases discomfort. All this results in a lot more face touching, the worst thing we can do. And of course, masks, which are magnets for the virus from both inside and outside, have to be precisely placed onto and taken off the face, handled very carefully, and laundered after each use (not after each day of shopping at several stores.) Face masks tend to give wearers a false sense of security, leading to relaxed adherence to proper social distancing (which, again, is more important than wearing masks.) These problems exist for people who want to wear masks; it's not hard to imagine how great the problems will be for those resentful of being forced to.

None of this even begins to address the long-term psychological and sociological consequences of mandatory universal face mask wearing, which, once initiated, won't be easy to reverse. Why shouldn't mask logic apply regarding the flu, which kills between 300,000 and 650,000 people a year? That upper estimate is twice the number of Covid-19 deaths to date (not that they're in competition.)

For these reasons, while I encourage those who want to wear masks to do so, I think it's premature for government to mandate it. There are too many individual health variables involved to understand the

potential consequences. As with everything involving the pandemic, my opinion is subject to change as we learn more.