

Is it really necessary to wear a face mask?

● Regulations have been eased but there may be merit in continuing to wear a mask

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With some conditions around wearing a face mask having been lifted, it is at the individual's discretion whether to wear one outdoors.

Whereas some may regard the concessions as a long-awaited 'freedom' – such as those plane passengers in the US who, on hearing a judge had struck the mask mandate, instantly whipped off their face coverings – others will hardly change their habits when it comes to masking up.

If you are one of those who still dons a mask when putting your nose out of the door, clinical infectious diseases epidemiologist Prof Salim Abdool Karim will encourage you: "There may be only a small benefit, but there is no reason to change – especially if you are concerned about infection, for example you have comorbidities such as cancer or diabetes, where even a small risk is not tolerable."

Pointing out that the pandemic is cyclical and the fifth wave will be here in a matter of weeks, Karim says he puts on his mask outdoors when he is going into a crowded situation.

Someone who always puts on a mask as she leaves her front door is Johannesburg-based health writer Pat Sidley, who says: "The block of flats I live in requires it in the common areas. I do not remove it until I get home but for specific circumstances: in a restaurant when I am going to eat, in a private home of friends when there are very few people about and I know who is there, but I usually want some kind of assurance that they have had vaccinations."

Sidley says although the government in March announced a relaxing of the rules, the management of the complex she lives in has been cautious: "The trustees of the body corporate made a rule which they have not changed, that masks must be worn in the building outside one's flat, that is in the common property. Lately there are some who have interpreted the rules as having changed, but I wear mine, as does the building manager."

One wishes everyone was as considerate, or perhaps compliant, because if the pandemic has taught us one thing it is that it is a shared responsibility, says Karim. "What you do affects



Mask slips: Many defend their decision to ditch masks by arguing it makes little difference, but the WHO is building up a record of evidence of the benefits of mask-wearing. /123RF/Roubart

others, your own actions do not define your risks."

With many defending their decision to ditch their masks by arguing it makes little difference, Karim cites two studies in defence. "The first, a laboratory study, showed that a three-layer mask was able to filter out 95% of particulate matter, and therefore the virus."

The second study, a clinical trial carried out in 2020 in Bangladesh, compared three groups wearing surgical masks, cloth masks and no mask. "It showed that wearing a mask is better than not, and a medical mask is better than cloth. It reduces the risk of transmission of the virus, as well as the attack rate of new infections."

The World Health Organization is building up a systematic record of evidence, says Karim. Another reason to carry on protecting your mouth and nose with three layers is that "in 2020/21, we did not have a flu season because masks played a critical role in combating airborne infections".

An issue most of us do not fully appreciate, he adds, is that "masks are much more effective in protecting a positive person from spreading the virus than protecting a negative person from being infected. If you have Covid, wearing a mask is a big plus to those around you." This is especially important because "most people who have it don't know they have it".

In SA, up to nine-tenths of Covid infections are asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic, or do not test. But he says in all these cases the virus can be transmitted, and the most infectious phase is the two to three

days before symptoms are felt.

Karim says government's approach has not been consistent, and he is in favour of a vaccine passport. "If removal of masks is mandated, it must be replaced with a vaccine mandate." He believes it is feasible in SA, where almost 50% have been vaccinated. It would not be compulsory vaccination, but would offer a choice: "If you want to go into public places you have to have been fully vaccinated."

SCPTICISM

Sidley similarly has some problems with the government's restrictions, which she says are "not altogether clear, but I do wear my mask outdoors. I have no reason to believe the virus disappeared with a change in the rules and I am normally in a space where there are people about".

Having some comorbidities and her background in health journalism inform her actions: "I am not a medical scientist, though I have a degree [in bioethics and health law] that helps me decipher what is written in journals. And I receive a science letter every week from one top scientist which helps debunk a lot of the armchair scientists' approach."

As in the US, mask compliance in SA can be ideological for some people. As Karim says: "In the US, masks define your ideology, your politics."

'WHAT YOU DO AFFECTS OTHERS, YOUR OWN ACTIONS DO NOT DEFINE YOUR RISKS'

Sidley is getting her fair share of scepticism: "A few people I know – who believe themselves to be well informed without any specific qualifications – find my keeping my mask on to be unnecessary or irritating and they say so. Then there are schools of thought that appear to differ on the value of masks, sanitising, etc. Mainly I err on the side of 'rather safe than sorry'. I do not, however, believe masks will ensure my safety and I am vaccinated and have had boosters and will get a second booster when that becomes possible."

Most medical professionals would like to see SA's vaccination rates get a boost, and Dr Albie de Frey, CEO at Travel Doctor Corporate, is no different. Having recently returned from Greece and the Netherlands, countries where about 71% of the population are fully vaccinated, he said KLM did not enforce wearing masks, and he expressed exasperation with the "ridiculous theatre thing" of temperature checks and landing forms when arriving at OR Tambo International Airport.

Regarding the use of masks in warding off Covid, he emphasises full vaccination but then takes a holistic view of health: "Get fit. Get sunshine. Wear a mask if you are among a group of people, especially indoors. Do as much socialising outdoors in well-ventilated spaces as possible. You do not need a mask jogging or walking on a pavement or in a park. Or driving on your own, with family members in a car. Use uncommon common sense, judge situations."

De Frey expressed concern that SA was stuck with outdated

legislation preventing it from keeping up with the changing pandemic. "Stop the theatre of fear. If we continue living in fear of the next wave, we are going to miss the post-pandemic economic wave and sink deeper into abject poverty and despair while the rest of the world has moved on."

Local airlines report some increase in non-compliance among passengers with regard to masks after the rules changed. Des O'Connor, chief commercial officer at kulula.com, says, "There is definitely increased frustration around having to comply and this is becoming very apparent. However, customers do still comply (albeit reluctantly) when asked by crew members."

Fortunately, there have been no violent scenes. "We haven't had any incidents that have not been able to be solved by the crew discussing it with the passengers. Our crew are frequently required to ask passengers to put their masks back on after eating/drinking, etc. We have seen an increase in this over recent weeks, but probably as a result of mask regulations having been relaxed outdoors, and passengers genuinely not [being] used to having to wear the mask all the time, so they forget."

The media last year reported that FlySafair had removed an unruly passenger from a flight because he refused to wear a mask. When asked for comment (on April 20), the airline said it had a "zero-tolerance" policy on non-compliance of Covid-19 regulations. "Masks are to be worn at all times and under no circumstances will FlySafair make any exceptions."