



News Release

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The Myths Behind the Mask

TTUHSC Expert and Infectious Disease Doctor Says They Will Save Lives

Differences of opinion and resulting decisions are the mainstay of this country's democracy, and debate is a healthy and beneficial process. Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) infectious disease physician Steven L. Berk, M.D., says no one is likely to die today because of one's own individual viewpoint, with a recent exception – choosing to not wear a mask, a controversy that goes beyond politics, arguments and opinions.

Berk, who is also the TTUHSC executive vice president and School of Medicine dean, says the most important thing to remember during this pandemic is – wearing masks does save lives.

“Masks are uncomfortable and look really bad,” Berk said. “Forcing people to wear masks is annoying, may even seem violating, but not that different from seat belts, or a crosswalk or smoking on an airplane. The most sacred common ground for all of us is that no one wants to see an innocent person die of a virus infection.”

Berk says there are many myths behind wearing a mask. Mask myths may include:

- Cloth masks don't stop COVID-19 germs.

There's evidence that just by having somebody cough, sneeze or talk loudly while they're wearing a cloth mask, you can see that most of their secretions. Of course, any mask, even a cloth mask, will block your sneeze, cough or speech from traveling through the air with millions of virus particles – the same air that others breathe. There is no argument about covering one's mouth when coughing or sneezing. One sick person, or perhaps an infected person without symptoms, can bring down a bar or room full of people. This is very unlikely to happen if the virus has two cloth masks to penetrate.

- I can wear my mask but it doesn't have to cover my nose.

All masks should be fitted snugly to your face and cover both your nose and mouth because the viral particles can enter either through your mouth or through your nose.

- If I am not showing symptoms, I won't get others sick

With the increasing numbers of younger people diagnosed with COVID-19, Berk says they need to know the stories of what's happened to people in ICUs. People can be asymptomatic and still infect others with the virus.

“What makes Coronavirus different than influenza and a lot of other infections is we don't know when somebody's symptomatic,” Berk said. “The positive thing about Ebola and smallpox is you definitely knew who had it and you could plan accordingly. But what's happened here, what's made this such a terrible infectious disease different than almost any other, is that there's so many people walking around, who don't think they're sick, but can give the infection to somebody else. And that's why we have to tell everybody you have to wear a mask. There's no way around this.”