

Infection Prevention and You



Should I wear a facemask during flu season?

Have you ever seen someone wearing a facemask in the street or on public transportation? You may wonder, “Should I wear a facemask during flu season or while on a plane?”

The short answer to this question is probably, “No.” For most people, covering your mouth when coughing and sneezing, and frequent hand washing—with warm water and soap, or alcohol-based hand sanitizer—is a much better way to prevent illness than wearing a facemask out in public. The best way to prevent flu is by getting vaccinated each year. An annual flu vaccine is necessary because flu viruses are constantly changing.

Some people choose to wear a facemask because of concern for respiratory viral infections like Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) or the flu. However, scientific studies disagree on how effective wearing a facemask can be. And the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not recommend that most people need to routinely wear facemasks in public places to avoid common (and even not so common) viruses.

There are instances where you may be advised by your primary care provider to wear a facemask; for example, if you have a weakened immune system or are undergoing chemotherapy. You may also be asked to wear a facemask when visiting someone in the hospital. In this case, the staff will instruct you on what particular facemask to use and how to properly wear it.

Your best bet to keep germs from spreading is to keep your hands clean, cover your cough, and stay home if you feel ill. And to prevent the flu, make sure every member of the family gets an annual flu vaccine.

Additional resources

United Against the Flu—American Hospital Association <http://www.advancinghealthinamerica.org/flu/>

Influenza—National Foundation for Infectious Diseases <http://www.nfid.org/influenza>

Seasonal Influenza: Flu Basics—CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/disease/index.htm>

Mask guidance—CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/infectioncontrol/maskguidance.htm>

MERS—CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/mers/index.html>

Influenza and pneumococcal immunization—APIC consumer alert <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=influenza-and-pneumococcal-immunization>

How to be a good visitor—APIC Infection Prevention and You <http://consumers.site.apic.org/infection-prevention-basics/how-to-be-a-good-visitor/>

Clean your hands often—APIC Infection Prevention and You <http://consumers.site.apic.org/infection-prevention-basics/wash-your-hands-often/>

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