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Yes, You Should Keep Wearing a Mask this Summer



Face coverings may be uncomfortable in warm weather, but they are crucial for controlling the pandemic.

BY KRISTEN STURT

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Since summer has gotten under way, new cases of **COVID-19** have been rising in many areas across the United States. To curb the spread of the disease, it remains critical that people wear masks when out in public, particularly indoors and in situations where social distancing is difficult.

But as temperatures increase, wearing face coverings in hot or humid conditions can be downright uncomfortable. In extreme cases, masks could even make it harder for some people to breathe or cause them to overheat.

“The face covering can affect the body’s ability to naturally cool off,” says Matthew Levy, DO, MSc, an associate professor of emergency medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. When you have a hard time cooling down, he adds, you may breathe faster, which can then lead to “more heat buildup” in your body.

This can be especially hazardous for those already at higher risk of heat-related illnesses, such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke. These groups, Dr. Levy says, “may experience additional physical stress related to the work of breathing when

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wearing a mask.”

Whatever you do, don't abandon this important safety measure. With a few smart moves, you can feel more comfortable wearing your mask in the heat and continue to protect yourself and your loved ones from COVID-19.

Groups at high risk for overheating

Everyone is somewhat vulnerable to heat-related illness on intensely hot days. This is especially true if proper preventive measures aren't taken, such as staying well-hydrated and avoiding overexertion.

But different people respond to scorching conditions in different ways, and certain personal and environmental factors influence the risk of becoming sick. These include:

- Age
- Health status
- Humidity levels
- Air temperature
- Length of exposure to heat

Young children, seniors and overweight people are more susceptible to heat-related illness, says Levy, as are those with chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure, **heart disease** and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Pregnant women and patients using alcohol also have increased odds, as do people taking certain drugs. These include some medications used for allergies, mental health conditions, Parkinson's disease and heart and blood pressure issues.

“This doesn't mean people shouldn't wear masks,” says Levy, “but rather they should take appropriate precautions when planning activities requiring them to wear masks.”

Safety tips for keeping cool in a mask

Though people in high-risk groups should take special care while wearing masks, everyone can feel more comfortable by following these tips.

Don't wear a mask when you don't have to. To stem the spread of COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends donning a cloth face covering in public places around people you don't live with, particularly if **social distancing** is difficult. This includes indoor areas like supermarkets and pharmacies, as well as outdoor areas where you're likely to come within 6 feet of others. Exceptions include children under age 2, people who cannot remove a mask without help and people with breathing problems. If you are among those with pre-existing breathing problems, seek direction from your healthcare provider.

Otherwise, when you're heading outside on a hot day, be sure to follow mask orders issued by your state or local government. If they haven't set out specific mandates, wear a face covering if close contact is a possibility. Carry one with you if you're not sure.

Unless authorities say differently, you do not have to wear a mask in open-air locations where you are not within 6 feet of other people. You don't have to wear one at home, either, unless you or someone in your family has COVID-19.

Plan ahead. Check the weather each morning and schedule your outings accordingly. Since temperatures tend to be higher in the middle of the day, it's

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Accordingly, since temperatures tend to be higher in the middle of the day, it's often best to stay inside during that time. "If you have to go out, try to do so earlier in the morning or later in the day," Levy suggests.

For longer-term plans, look at your local extended weather forecast and arrange outdoor activities for cooler days if possible.

Choose the right material. Natural fibers such as cotton are more breathable than a synthetic fabric like polyester, making them good picks for hot weather.

Be sure to check the product description if you're ordering a mask online. If you're **making one yourself**, the CDC recommends using "tightly-woven" cotton, like the kind found in quilts or bedsheets. T-shirts can work, as well. One layer will not block droplets completely, but two or more layers can offer added protection.

The color of your mask matters, too. "In general, lighter-colored cloths are preferred to darker colors when it comes to preventing heat illness," says Levy. Since dark-hued masks can absorb heat, opt for a white, yellow or other pale-colored covering to keep your face cooler.

Make your mask comfortable. The less you're bothered by your mask, the more likely you are to wear it. So, make sure the fit is snug, covering both your nose and mouth, but not tight. If elastic straps bother your skin, use a different style of covering or a mask with cloth ties.

Avoid wearing makeup under your mask, too, since it may clog your pores and cause irritation. If the fabric begins to chafe, try a different style or use a skin moisturizer that does not block pores.

Don't wear it wet. Not only can a soggy mask obstruct your breathing, but it's a good place for bacteria to multiply. Change your face covering if it becomes damp, dirty or soaked with sweat. **Avoid swimming** in a mask altogether.

A good rule of thumb is to bring extras in a paper bag whenever you plan to be outside for a while; you can also use the bag to store soiled masks. Remember to remove your mask from your head using the ear straps and "as a reminder, always wash your hands or use a hand sanitizer after touching your mask," says Levy.

Keep a clean covering. It's important to regularly wash and dry re-usable masks to ensure they are dirt- and germ-free, and to promote filtration. "The CDC recommends washing cloth face coverings after each use," says Levy. But, he adds, "practically speaking, it is probably reasonable to wash it daily in most circumstances."

Many masks are machine washable, in which case you can throw them in with your regular laundry. Take care to use detergent and "the warmest appropriate water setting," the CDC advises. You can also hand-wash your mask by soaking it in 4 teaspoons of household bleach mixed with 1 quart of lukewarm water, and then rinsing it thoroughly.

Dry your face covering on the highest setting or let it air dry. Don't use it when it's still damp, Levy says.

Take other hot-weather precautions. While these strategies aren't mask-specific, they can help prevent you from overheating:

- **Don't overexert yourself.** Scale back exercise and yard work or

reschedule them to cooler times of the day.

- **Take regular breaks.** Rest in the shade or find an air-conditioned indoor area to relax.
- **Hydrate early and often.** Bring an insulated water bottle when you head outside to avoid using public fountains during the pandemic.
- **Dress for the weather.** Opt for light-colored, breathable clothing, just like you would with a mask.

If you're at higher risk for overheating, it's also a good idea to stay in contact with your loved ones. Let them know when you're leaving the house and where you're going.

What to do if you feel sick

Though following these rules can reduce your chances of developing a **heat-related illness**, high temperatures may still cause you to become unwell, whether or not you're wearing a face mask. In addition to heavy sweating, be on the lookout for these warning signs:

- Nausea or vomiting
- Lightheadedness or dizziness
- Headache
- Dark-colored urine
- Cold, pale and/or moist skin
- Fatigue or weakness
- Muscle cramps
- Double or blurry vision

Should you experience any of these symptoms, stop what you're doing and move indoors or to a shady outdoor area. Remove your mask and rest for a bit. Drink water and if possible, take a cooling bath or pour cool water over your head.

Call 911 if you still feel symptoms after 30 to 60 minutes, or if they include a high fever, loss of consciousness, confusion, agitation, an inability to drink or a fast, strong pulse.

Medically reviewed in July 2020.

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