M inistry of Health would like to provide guidance to the general public on the use of face masks and other face covers in the community by individuals who are not ill in order to reduce potential asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic transmission of COVID-19. The document also provides advice on the use of masks during home care for patients with COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

There is increasing evidence that persons with asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic or early stages of infection can contribute to the community transmission of COVID-19. A face mask will help reduce the spread of infection in the community by minimizing the shedding of respiratory droplets from infected persons who may not even know they are infected and before they become symptomatic.

Types of masks

1. **Medical masks**
- Should be reserved for health care workers and those providing care to COVID-19 patients at home.
- The use of medical masks can also prevent the spread of respiratory droplets from an infected person to other people and limits potential contamination of the environment by droplets.
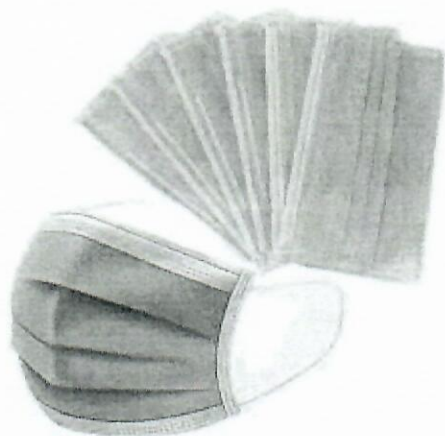
Example of a medical mask

2. Respirators
- Are designed to protect healthcare workers from exposure to infectious agents during aerosol-generating procedures.
- Respirators with valves do not prevent the release of exhaled infectious particles from the wearer into the environment, hence cannot be used for source control (e.g. asking COVID-19 patients or suspects to wear facemasks).

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Example of a Respirator – N95 Mask

3. Non-medical masks (cloth masks)

- Are various forms of self-made masks or face covers made of cloth or other textiles.
- They are not standardized and are not intended for use in healthcare settings, by healthcare professionals or for home care of cases of COVID-19.

Example of a non-medical mask - cloth face mask

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cloth Masks

- Ministry of Health recommends wearing of non-medical masks (cloth masks) by the public in settings where social distancing is not possible and where there is widespread community transmission.
- Community-wide use of masks should be accompanied by risk communications and community messaging, with instructions for correct use and critically not at the expense of other important messages about hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene and other evidence informed measures.
- Non-medical masks (cloth masks) are not recommended for use by persons providing home care for COVID-19 patients.

2. Medical Masks and Respirators

- Ministry of Health will prioritise the use of medical masks and respirators for healthcare workers and caregivers of patient(s) with COVID-19 in household settings. Medical masks are recommended as a means of source control for symptomatic persons in order to prevent the spread of respiratory droplets produced by coughing, talking or sneezing.
- Medical masks are designed to be single use and have only been tested for efficacy on that basis.
- There is currently no safe way for medical masks to be decontaminated and reused.

3. General recommendations

- Masks should be used in addition (and not in preference) to other infection control and prevention (IPC) measures: hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, environmental cleaning and physical distancing measures.
- Face masks should not be worn by babies and children under 2 years, or by disabled people who are not able to remove the mask themselves.
- Medical masks are not recommended for people who are not ill or who are not providing care for patient(s) with COVID-19 in household settings.

CONSIDERATIONS TO BE USED WHEN MAKING CLOTH MASKS

Public/community use of cloth masks should meet the following features the following features:

1. Numbers of layers of fabric – multiple layers (minimum 2 layers) of high thread count
2. Breathability of material used (cotton material, chitenje) – should not markedly increase the work of breathing
3. Water repellence/hydrophobic qualities – should resist absorption by fluid droplets on the outer surface
4. Shape of mask- should cover the mouth and nose fully
5. Fitting of mask- should be comfortable to wear without the need for touching or readjustment once in place

HOW TO PUT ON AND TAKE OFF A FACE MASK

For any type of mask, appropriate use and disposal are essential to reduce the risk of transmission
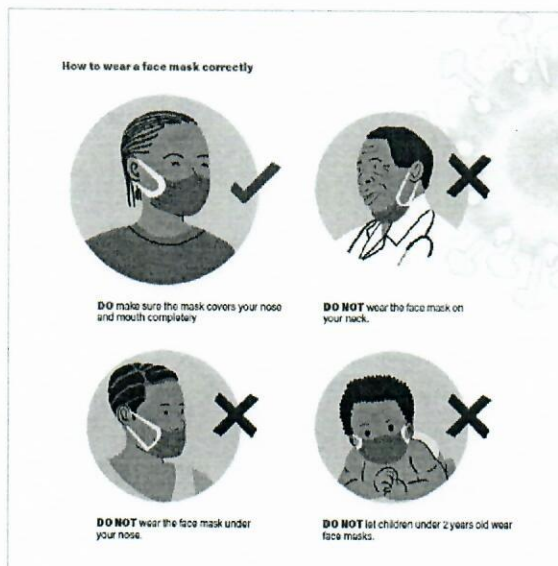
- Check the mask is clean, undamaged and dry before use.
- Clean hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water before putting on a face mask
- Place the mask on, ensuring it fully covers the mouth and nose, and tie securely/place elastic ear loops to minimize any gaps.

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- Avoid touching the front of the mask while wearing it, if you do, clean hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or wash hands with soap and water.
- Remove the mask by untying from behind or taking off the elastic ear loops. **Do not touch the front of the mask.**
- After removal or whenever a used mask is inadvertently touched, clean hands using an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
- Change masks when they become damp with a new clean, dry mask.
- For non-medical cloth masks, wash thoroughly with hot water and detergent, then either use a hot iron or drying in the sun.
- When the cloth mask becomes unusable, dispose it in a pit latrine or burn it
- For those who will use medical masks - discard single-use masks after each use responsibly in covered waste bins or bags
- Do not litter the ground with used masks.
- Do not re-use single-use masks

How to wear a face mask correctly

DO make sure the mask covers your nose and mouth completely

DO NOT wear the face mask on your neck.

DO NOT wear the face mask under your nose.

DO NOT let children under 2 years old wear face masks.

Do's and Donts for wearing a face mask

In order to slow the spread on COVID19 in Malawi, masks must be worn correctly and consistently along with other preventive measures such as keeping at least 1 metre away from people and frequent handwashing.

Your cooperation will be highly appreciated,

Dr. Dan Namarika
SECRETARY OF HEALTH

Frequently Asked Questions on Face Masks

Why should I wear a face mask?

There is increasing evidence that persons with asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic or early stages of infection can contribute to the community transmission of COVID-19. A face mask will help reduce the spread of infection in the community by minimizing the shedding of respiratory droplets from infected persons who may not even know they are infected and before they become symptomatic. Ministry of Health recommends that people wear a cloth mask to cover their nose and mouth in the community setting. This is to protect people around you if you are infected but do not have symptoms.

When do I need to wear a face mask?

A cloth face mask should be worn whenever people are in a community setting, especially in situations where you may be near a group of people where social distancing is not possible and where there is widespread community transmission. These settings include grocery stores, markets, banks, funerals etc. Face masks are not a substitute for social distancing. Cloth face masks are especially important to wear in public in areas of widespread COVID-19 illness.

Do I still need to stand at least 1m from people if I wear a mask?

Yes. Wearing cloth face mask is an additional public health measure people should take to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The public is advised to continue to practice other measures such as standing at least 1-2 metre apart (social distancing), avoiding hand shaking, frequent hand washing and other everyday preventive actions. A cloth face mask is not intended to protect the wearer, but it may prevent the spread of virus from the wearer to others. This would be especially important if someone is infected but does not have symptoms.

What type of face mask should be worn?

The Ministry of Health is recommending that people who have not been diagnosed with COVID-19 use a Cloth face mask when in public or at times when social distancing is not possible. The mask can be made from household items or made at home from common materials like cotton, chitenje etc. at low cost.

Who should not wear cloth face masks?

- Cloth face masks should not be placed on young children younger than 2 years of age, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the cover without assistance.
- Health workers or guardians taking care of patients with confirmed COVID-19 should not use cloth masks (they should ideally use medical masks or N95)
- Patients with confirmed COVID diagnosis should not wear cloth face masks (they should ideally use medical masks)

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Why is MOH recommending cloth face masks and not medical masks for the public?

Surgical masks and N95 respirators are in short supply globally and should be reserved for healthcare workers and for those managing patients with COVID-19. However, studies have shown that widespread and consistent wearing of cloth masks by the public may help slow the spread of COVID-19 by reducing the potential for those who are asymptomatic but are infected from passing the illness to others.

Can I reuse my cloth mask?

Yes, it is possible to reuse a cloth mask – but you must wash it with water and soap and let it dry in between uses. Ideally have at least 2 or more cloth masks so that you can use one while the other is being cleaned.

How long can I wear a cloth mask for?

You can wear a cloth mask for an extended period of time – up to 6 hours. However, if it becomes wet and damp it is advisable to change your mask for a dry, clean mask.

Is it ok to share face masks?

It is not advisable to share masks especially if someone has just worn it without it being washed and dried first. Sharing or exchanging of face masks may promote transmission of viral particles on the mask from one person to the other. Ideally everyone should have their own mask.

What type of mask should I wear if I am taking care of a patient with COVID-19?

Guardians and those living with a patient with confirmed COVID-19 should wear a medical mask and NOT a cloth mask.

What type of mask should a person with Confirmed COVID-19 wear?

Patients or those suspected to have COVID-19 should wear a medical mask and NOT a cloth mask.

Is it ok to wear my mask inside out if it becomes dirty on the outer layer?

No, do not reverse your mask, simply take off the mask and use another mask. Wearing of the mask inside out may increase chances of infection if viral particles landed on the outer part of the mask.