WHO changes tack, now says all should wear masks in public

LONDON • The World Health Organisation (WHO) has updated its guidance to recommend that governments ask everyone to wear fabric face masks in public areas where there is a risk of transmission of Covid-19, to help reduce the spread of the pandemic disease.

In its new guidance, prompted by evidence from studies conducted in recent weeks, the WHO stressed that face masks were only one of a range of tools that can reduce the risk of viral transmission, and should not give a false sense of protection. It also advised that people aged over 60 or with health issues should wear a medical-grade mask when physical distancing is not possible.

"Masks on their own will not protect you from Covid-19," the WHO's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters at a briefing on Friday.

The WHO's technical lead expert on Covid-19, Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, said in a Reuters interview: "We are advising governments to encourage that the general public wear a mask. And we specify a fabric mask — that is, a non-medical mask.

"We have evidence now that if this is done properly it can provide a barrier ... for potentially infectious droplets," she added.

Critics say the announcement was long overdue, as masks are an easy and inexpensive preventive measure.

A study funded by the WHO concluded last week that respirator masks, such as the N95 mask, are better than surgical masks for healthcare workers. It also found that face shields, goggles and glasses may offer additional protection from the coronavirus.

The experts consulted for the WHO's updated advice on the use of masks include Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious disease expert at the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine; Dr Ling Nai Lim, director of infection control at Singapore General Hospital; Professor Paul As Farrell Tambyah from the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine; and Dr Marinthu Kalsi, senior infectious disease consultant at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

While some countries and US states have recommended or mandated the wearing of face coverings in public, the WHO had previously said it was not enough evidence for or against the use of masks for healthy people in the wider community.

It had always recommended that medical masks be worn by people who are sick and by those caring for them. Britain has said masks will be compulsory for passengers on buses, trains, aircraft and ferries in England from June 15.

Singapore had previously followed the WHO's earlier guidance on advising only those who were sick to wear masks. But it stepped up encouraging the use of masks in early April after evidence emerged of asymptomatic cases and also undetected cases in the community.

Latest guidance

WHEN SHOULD YOU WEAR A MASK? The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends the wearing of non-medical masks by:

- Everyone in public settings such as stores, at work, social or mass gatherings, and in closed settings such as schools or places of worship.
- People living in cramped conditions, such as in refugee camps or slums.
- On public transport.

WHAT KIND OF MASK? Because of the risk of diverting critical resources from healthcare workers, the WHO says medical masks should be reserved for healthcare professionals and people at-risk groups.

Everyone else should use what it terms non-medical or fabric masks.

SOME ADVICE ON MASK CHOICE

- Choose materials that capture droplets but remain easy to breathe through.
- Avoid stretchy materials, because stretching may increase pores, and preferably use a fabric that can be washed at 60 deg C or higher.
- A minimum of three layers is needed, including an absorbent inner layer touching the mouth, and a synthetic outer layer that does not easily absorb water.
- Wash the mask frequently, at the highest temperature possible, and do not share it.

People in masks at The Promontory @ Marina Bay yesterday. The World Health Organisation's new guidelines on masks was prompted by evidence from studies conducted in recent weeks. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LANG.


dated the wearing of face coverings in public, the WHO had previously said there was not enough evidence for or against the use of masks for healthy people in the wider community.

It had always recommended that medical masks be worn by people who are sick and by those caring for them.

Britain has said masks will be compulsory for passengers on buses, trains, aircraft and ferries in England from June 15.

Singapore had previously followed the WHO's earlier guidance on advising only those who were sick to wear masks. But it stepped up discouraging the use of masks in early April after evidence emerged of asymptomatic cases and also undetected cases in the community.

Mask wearing when outside was then made compulsory around mid-April. Those who did not comply risk a S$100 fine for the first-time offenders.

The United Nations agency's advice that healthcare workers dealing with Covid-19 patients, or with suspected cases of the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, should wear medical masks remains the same, Dr Van Kerkhove said.

But the advice has been broadened to recommend everyone coming into contact with any patients or residents in clinics, hospitals, care homes and long-term residential facilities should also wear masks at all times, she said.

REUTERS, NTYHES

- Additional reporting by Tan Ting Wei

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.
Permission required for reproduction