

Source: The Straits Times, Page A20
Date: 15 September 2023

More clinics asking visitors without face masks to pay for one

Kolette Lim

When Ms Wee Jing Xuan visited Macpherson Medical Clinic for her human papillomavirus vaccination appointment in August, she had to pay 10 cents at the reception, even before she saw the doctor.

When Ms Wee entered the clinic, the receptionist told her it was compulsory to wear a mask and prompted her to buy one.

The National University of Singapore undergraduate, 22, said: "I don't see anyone wearing masks any more, so I had forgotten that there were still existing measures, and it was still compulsory to wear a mask to the clinic."

After making people wear masks for public health reasons for more than two years because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Singapore eased its mask mandate on Feb 13, 2023. But masks are still required in certain settings, including at hospitals, clinics and residential care homes.

Now, more clinics are charging for masks, and visitors who show up without one have to pay between 10 cents and 50 cents a piece.

For example, all seven polyclinics under the National Healthcare Group (NHG) started charging 30



cents for an individually packed mask from Tuesday.

NHG's operations director Sharon Chen said the polyclinics have observed an increasing number of patients and visitors arriving without wearing masks, despite SMS re-

mindings, and online and physical notices informing them to do so.

Patients who show up without a mask will have to buy one at the retail pharmacy, and mask-dispensing machines will soon be installed around the clinics.

Some private clinics are doing the same – forgetting to wear a mask to Street 21 Clinic in Tampines now costs a patient 50 cents, on top of the medical bill. Clinic assistant Serene Tan said: "If we keep giving masks out for free, patients will not

make it a habit to wear masks despite reminders. If we charge them, they will be extra aware."

The clinic used to give out about 10 masks a day before imposing the fee since Monday.

But some are absorbing the costs.

Singapore eased its mask mandate on Feb 13, but masks are still required in certain settings, including at hospitals, clinics and residential care homes. While more clinics are charging between 10 cents and 50 cents for a mask if visitors forget to wear one, some clinics are absorbing the costs. ST FILE PHOTO

Healthcare institutions under SingHealth, which manages nine polyclinics, and the National University Health System (NUHS), which manages seven, do not levy a fee.

An NUHS spokesperson said: "We would like to remind all patients and visitors that the use of masks is required in accordance with guidelines by the health authorities... this is essential to better protect patients and healthcare workers from infectious diseases."

Kensington Family Clinic general manager Sandy Mah said the clinic gives masks out for free to retain its patients. The clinic gives out about 70 masks a day, as many patients visit the doctor with their family members, she added.

"It's already difficult to get them to wear a mask, so how can we charge them? The masks are not expensive and a box of them costs less than \$5, so we will not charge patients now or in the future," said Ms Mah.

Photographer Lim Li Ting, 23, who forgot to wear a mask for two trips to a clinic recently, said: "I think it is reasonable to charge for masks only if it is really causing a big loss to their business. If not, it seems a little unnecessary."

kolettelim@sph.com.sg