

Diana Scafuto

Professor Fellingner

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### Why Wearing a Mask During the COVID-19 Pandemic is Imperative

“Why are you wearing a mask outside?” asked an older woman wearing a red “Keep America Great” tank top at the Jersey Shore in mid-July during a global pandemic. My sister-in-law replied, “because we want to” and we walked faster to get away from the unmasked woman walking less than a foot behind us.

In the moment, I said nothing. For the following minutes, days and weeks I thought about her question and what I wish I had said in reply. The easiest answer would have been: “because it is mandatory in New Jersey,” but I believe there are more reasons to wear a mask than simply to follow the rules. Why are you wearing a seatbelt in the car? Why are you wearing a hairnet to cook? Rule following is not the only reason we as humans behave the way we do. We uphold principles and morals and often strive to protect ourselves as well as others. Wearing a mask during a pandemic is no different.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken the world by storm. It has infected over 33 million people worldwide and claimed the lives of over one million (Coronavirus Cases). Many countries restricted travel and were able to enforce rules to prevent the spread of the virus. The United States, however, has failed to reduce cases, and they have shot up over the past six months. The U.S. passed China for the most cases of COVID-19 on March 26, 2020, and has since stayed in the top three spots worldwide (Roser). Despite COVID-19 infecting over 7.3 million Americans over the past eight months and claiming the lives of over 210,000 of them,

there is still debate over whether or not preventative measures and restrictions, such as limiting exposure to crowded or confined areas and social distancing, are necessary (United States). Most heavily debated is the issue of wearing a face mask or covering. Masks have been proven to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends wearing masks and social distancing when in public spaces and around others (COVID-19: Considerations for Wearing Masks). A small, but vocal, group of Americans believe that wearing a mask is unconstitutional and unproductive despite definitive research proving their efficacy (Marcus). The act of wearing a mask in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic is imperative to slow the spread of the virus and is not an encroachment of one's constitutional rights.

According to the CDC, COVID-19 is spread from person to person through close contact (within six feet) or exposure to respiratory droplets from an infected person (COVID-19: Considerations for Wearing Masks). The virus can also be spread by presymptomatic and asymptomatic people, meaning the individual does not know they are infected and therefore will not take the necessary precautions. This is one reason why wearing a mask is crucial. If an individual is asymptomatic, wearing a mask will reduce the likelihood that they will spread the virus to others; therefore, masks are worn to protect others, which is morally important to many (Li et al.). If one person is wearing a mask, it will encourage another person to wear one so they can protect one another as well as themselves.

Several studies have proven the efficacy of public mask wearing. According to a study done in April 2020, masks help to “filter viral particles” as well as either block or redirect “rapid turbulent jets generated by coughing” (Li et al.). The study concluded that masks, in combination with social distancing and frequent hand washing, can substantially reduce the transmission of

COVID-19, and, therefore, lessen the burden the virus has had on society and the need for future stay-at-home orders (Bai and Li et al.). Another recent study looked at the effect of mask mandates on the number of cases in each U.S. state. This epidemiological study concluded that “there was a significant decline in daily COVID-19 growth rate after the mandating of face covers in public” compared to states that did not mandate mask wearing (Lyu and Wehby).

Despite evidence suggesting that mask use in combination with social distancing and frequent hand washing is reducing the spread of COVID-19, there are still individuals who do not believe in wearing masks. Anti-maskers argue that masks do not work and that the government cannot force its citizens to wear a mask because it is unconstitutional and a violation of freedoms. These claims are not evidence-based since masks do work as proven through numerous studies and the government can constitutionally require the wearing of masks. According to the American Constitution Society, “abundant medical justification exists for a state or local government to consider [masks] a necessary public health measure” (Price and Diaz). Many anti-maskers have protested their state’s mandates indicating that they have the right as American citizens to choose not to wear a mask. According to *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, however, the Constitution “does not import an absolute right in each person to be at all times, and in all circumstances, wholly freed from restraint”; therefore, Americans are not absolutely free to choose which mandates to follow and which to ignore (“*Jacobson v. Massachusetts*”). In addition, during a pandemic, the government has “the authority to do a lot of things that would otherwise be questionable,” so mandating mask wearing is a justifiable and constitutional preventative measure (Tompkins).

So, why is there still debate over mask wearing in the United States? One reason why is due to the mixed messages President Donald Trump has sent to American citizens. At the start of

the United States' response to the pandemic, health officials concluded that the general population should not wear masks as supply was low for healthcare workers and data regarding asymptomatic transmission was forthcoming (Lyu and Wehby). On April 3, not long after stay-at-home orders were announced, the CDC changed their minds regarding public mask wearing and recommended that masks should be worn by everyone in public spaces and when social distancing could not be maintained (Marcus). On this same day, Trump spoke about the CDC's new guidelines in his press briefing indicating that wearing a mask is voluntary, and, therefore, he would not be wearing one ("Remarks by President Trump..."). For those who follow the President blindly, his refusal to wear a mask at this time was not a productive way to encourage more widespread mask wearing. As of July 2020, over four months after the CDC's recommendations, Trump began endorsing the use of masks publicly, but many believe this was too late to encourage those who abstain from mask wearing to comply (Colvin and Madhani).

In order to slow the spread of COVID-19, Americans must wear masks and follow all other CDC guidelines. The world has lost too many people to COVID-19, and many of those deaths could have been avoided had Americans followed the mandates set in place. The numbers speak for themselves: over 210,000 Americans have died from COVID-19 and other COVID related complications. Rules need to be followed, social distancing needs to be maintained, and masks need to be worn in order to prevent further transmissions and more deaths. We will get through this pandemic if Americans learn from other countries, listen to health officials and come together as a nation.

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