

Use of Facemasks and Respirators During an Influenza Pandemic

Speaker: Dr. Julie Louise Gerberding
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Recorded at a Press Briefing May 3, 2007

Announcer:

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

CDC is not recommending persons to stockpile masks or respirators at this time. If you purchase any, the manufacturer supplies important instructions with facemasks and respirators on how they are to be put on and checked to make sure they are properly positioned on the face. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions, specific to the product you are using.

Dr. Julie Gerberding:

What we're hoping to be able to do today is to inform people about the kinds of face protection that might be helpful for protecting people in non-occupational settings during a pandemic. So let me first start with the most important perspective on this. No mask or any facial protection is going to alone be enough to completely eliminate the risk of a pandemic. So people have to always remember that what they're doing about their protection has to be done in context of some other steps.

The most important thing during a pandemic would be to try and avoid contact with others who are sick. That's why we recommend that you avoid people who are ill with respiratory illness, and that you stay home in the kinds of situations where you have family members who might be ill, so that you're not taking their virus and moving it someplace else into the community.

A face mask is the kind of mask that you see surgeons wear in the operating room. If you're someone who's either in an operating room or you're watching soap operas, you'll often see the surgeons have this kind of face mask on. It's just an inexpensive piece of material that goes across the nose and mouth. And think of it as the way that we sort of catch and contain respiratory secretions. So if you're coughing, sneezing, or sometimes even talking, droplets come out of your mouth and these kind of masks are very good catchers of those droplets and so they keep your secretions contained within you, and prevent them from going on to expose other people.

Another kind of more sophisticated mask is called a respirator. Particularly in our guidance we're talking about something known as an N95 respirator. These are very specially engineered facemasks that are designed to filter out about 95 percent of the particles that might be moving toward your breathing zone when you're breathing in air. These masks remove very, very small particles and prevent you from inhaling things that are the size of a virus.

The problem with a respirator is that if there's any gap between the respirator fitting to your face and your face itself, air is coming in around the mask, and so its filtration isn't obviously 95 percent. It drops down to something that would be more like the kind of face mask I described in the first place.

We know that again, none of these face masks are going to protect people completely, so you do need to take additional steps of prevention. Avoiding sick people, avoiding crowds, staying home if you are sick and if you have to be in a crowded environment wearing a facemask to prevent your respiratory secretions from contaminating someone else really makes sense.

CDC is stockpiling millions and millions of masks in its national strategic stockpile, but we will be using these masks for the states to distribute, primarily to those people who know that they're going to be taking care of people with pandemic influenza. So our stockpile in the government is primarily for healthcare workers and others in the front line of taking care of sick people.

Announcer:

For more information on pandemic flu, call 1-800-CDC-INFO, or log on to www.pandemicflu.gov.