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COVID-19: Which Mask?
By Dr. Michele Dikkers, Chair of Clayton County Board of Health

Masks…

Have we talked about masks? We’ve talked about the importance of masks. We’ve talked about the recommendation by the CDC. The recommendation that we all wear masks in public settings around people who don’t live in our household. We’ve talked about the fact that masks stop the spread of COVID-19, and at this time, we have nothing else, with the exception of closing everything down.

The CDC makes the recommendation for masks based on their effectiveness to act as a simple barrier in preventing respiratory droplets from traveling into the air when people cough, sneeze, talk and raise their voices. The louder we talk, the farther the particles can travel.

But we have not yet taken the time to discuss the mask itself. So, here we go. The CDC recommends that we wear masks with two or more layers. To wear the mask properly, make sure it fits over your nose and mouth, and secure it under your chin.

Covering just your mouth or nose, only does half the job. It should fit snugly against the side of your face without gaps. For those of us that wear glasses, finding masks that fit tightly/closely over the nose, or one with a nose wire, will help prevent fogging.

There have been a number of studies investigating the effectiveness of material used for the masks. Most recently, Duke University compared 14 different masks and material, to wearing no mask. The results confirmed CDC recommendations of 2-3 layers of tightly woven cotton to be the best in a cloth mask (decreased droplet transmission by 80%), after a polypropylene fabric. A mask made of knit material decreased droplet transmission by 65%. And though bandanas are cotton, it is not tightly woven cotton, and was only 50% as effective. They also tested a single layer polyester/spandex gaiter, this was found to be no more effective than not wearing a mask.

How do we know if the weave it tight enough? The simple test, hold the material up to the light. It may not tell you how tight the weave is, but if you hold it up to the light and you can see through it, it isn’t tight enough.

The CDC recommends not using fabrics that are hard to breathe through when making a mask, like vinyl. Masks with exhalation valves are not effective because they allow virus particles to escape into the air.

The CDC recommends wearing face shields to protect the wearer from contracting the virus through the eyes. The effectiveness of wearing shields alone to prevent spread has not yet been confirmed, evaluation is ongoing. When using a face shield, it is still recommended to wear a mask with it. Evaluating the effectiveness of gaiters, is also ongoing per the CDC.
Masks should not be shared. They should be changed daily or if they become soiled and cleaned after use. Washing the cloth mask in warm soapy water and drying in a dryer will be adequate to sanitize them.

Avoid touching your mask while wearing it. If you need to readjust it, do so by using the edges of the mask, not the front of the mask.

Wear your mask into a restaurant, once you have reached your table, remove the mask. Put the mask back on whenever you leave your table.

If sitting in the stands at a school or sporting event, keep your mask in place. Remember, when cheering on the students or your favorite team, airborne particles can travel farther than when you are talking. Masks protect those sitting in front of and around you.

So, find a mask that is comfortable to wear. Maybe even find one that fits your personality. Choose a mask with 2-3 layers of tightly woven cotton, for the best protection. Be safe out there. Be Well.

We are in this together.