

Face masks: What more do consumers need to know?

Consumer Conversation Summary

Recently the Chief Health Officer confirmed that Queenslanders should wear face masks when we can't socially distance. However, wearing face masks continues to be a topic of discussion and confusion amongst consumers.

Eleven consumers from Health Consumers Queensland's COVID-19 Community of Interest joined Jordan Medlock from the Strategic Communications Branch's Project Team to explore the issues which are causing concern and identify additional information which would enable consumers to make confident and informed choices about mask wearing as part of their personal and collective COVID-19 protection strategy.

Key points for Queensland Health

- **Consumers are being confronted about wearing a mask.** Address and provide strategies to handle the criticism people who wear masks are encountering from strangers.
- **They are working.** Face masks do act as a visual reminder to socially distance.
- **People are fatigued and the message is wearing thin.** Consistently repeat the message in different ways to help instill the habit and correct misconceptions about wearing masks.
- **Plug the gaps in information.** But communicate via graphics rather than words.

Key issues and suggestions from consumers

How do we manage criticism and intimidation by strangers for wearing a mask?

Following an experience where a close family member was confronted and intimidated by a member of the public for wearing a mask and told he didn't need to wear one, a consumer said he was worried about older or more vulnerable people who are wearing masks and may encounter this type of behaviour.

He asked, "Is there some way we can protect people who choose to wear masks from people who deliberately try to undermine the message?"

Consumers suggested:

- Walk away, don't engage. "To engage can lead to conflict and everyone is under stress. Let them say what they want to say."
- Re-frame mask wearing as a social as well as an individual responsibility. "I'm doing it for your benefit as well as mine."
- "It's like speed limits, drink driving – anything that protects society as a whole."
- "We need more social/community solidarity. Got to look after each other."
- Be aware that "people who are opposed to doing something feel they need to say something so they don't feel alone."
- Accept that "there will still be people who won't comply. We've seen that throughout COVID."

Does a face mask encourage social distancing?

In spite of consumers reporting that it is very hard to get used to wearing face masks and they feel suffocated at first, they also reported that they do act as a visual reminder to people around them to keep their distance.

“If people are daydreaming they will see the mask and ‘it’s oops sorry’. Pre Covid you’d walk into somebody and say sorry, now within a metre, you say sorry. Our sense of personal space has got bigger.”

Conversely, face masks are also the most visible and constant reminder that we are in the midst of a pandemic and may also be contributing to the sense of tension, stress and fear that so many people are now feeling.

Does a mask create difficulties for people with visual impairments or hearing loss?

A consumer who is visually impaired and in a high risk category said, “I’ve been wearing masks for years because of a chronic lung infection and have a huge stock. I feel really comfortable. It’s interesting because the blind community is dead against wearing masks because they say they need to be able to hear their location. It goes over nose or mouth, not ears so is it more about feeling uncomfortable, a psychological thing? In Victoria they have been getting doctors to say they don’t need to wear them.”

Another consumer said she understood it would be difficult for the deaf community to lip read especially if some people don’t use Auslan.

How can the Chief Health Officer help people establish this new habit?

“People are fatigued and the message is starting to wear thin.”

There are signs that the Chief Health Officer must constantly repeat this advice to help people establish this new habit. A consumer relayed a conversation she had with her hairdresser that demonstrates how quickly messages lose their impetus. There was only one other person in the salon but no one was wearing a mask. Her hairdresser said that just after the CHO advised people to wear masks when they couldn’t socially distance, everyone was wearing one but now no one is wearing a mask.

Should mask wearing become a directive?

“The longer this goes on and on, the more the tension grows and the harder it is to maintain equanimity, calmness, objectivity and social responsibility. The marches on Friday were a sad sign of where much of the population are. A directive from Jeanette Young would be the worst thing we could do but I feel people are going to grow more and more frustrated.”

Another consumer added, “Everyone is under stress. Elimination is too late. People are far too stressed, worried about themselves, the economy. Really hard to do this because everyone has their own individual issues and problems and as a result strange things happen. Can’t say anything to people unless it is a directive but it’s up to social responsibility and some people just don’t care.

Are masks cheap, easy to find and which ones are effective?

“I’ve been ripped off a few times. The washable masks weren’t packaged with the filters. What was the point in having a mask without a filter? Single use is particularly costly for families.”

Consumers still need information about which masks are effective as well as reassurances that they are inexpensive and easy to source particularly as people may still perceive them as being expensive, difficult to find and ineffective.

“The first four took weeks to get to me. I paid in American dollars, was billed in Ireland, the company was Indian and they came from Italy. \$72 for four masks which were very poor quality.”

Could Queensland Health’s communications about wearing masks be enhanced?

Consumers are looking to leaders to show best practice in mask etiquette. However, one consumer noticed that “some [political] leaders when addressing the media take off their mask and fold it up and put it in their pocket then when finished pull it back out and put it on. Their hands are all over the mask and I wonder how safe these are then and are they setting a good example for the public? I wish they would remove with just touching the ear straps.”

A number cited Norman Swan’s [‘how to put on and remove a mask’](#) video as a good example of communicating mask etiquette. Jordan confirmed that a Queensland Health version is currently in development.

Jordan also shared Queensland Health’s [website page on face masks](#) and invited consumers’ comments. Many agreed it was text heavy and used advanced vocabulary which is off-putting for many people especially anyone from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Jordan also noted the gap in information about specific situations to wear masks in e.g. sporting matches and a message calling for community support and solidarity.

Consumers’ advice was to:

- use pictures and graphics rather than words (as long as these are described for blind people)
- include messages from high risk consumers to encourage people to wear masks for them
- develop specific messages for high risk consumers
- relate wearing a mask to sport e.g. you don’t play hockey without your shin guards, you don’t face a fast bowler without a helmet and you don’t play cricket without a box!