

U.S. health officials say Americans shouldn't wear face masks to prevent coronavirus — here are 3 other reasons not to wear them

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Most people don't use face masks correctly, a Johns Hopkins public health expert told MarketWatch



The World Health Organization says “the use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide the adequate level of protection” against the spread of coronavirus.

Getty Images

Though health officials have warned Americans to prepare for the spread of the novel coronavirus in the U.S., people shouldn't wear face masks to prevent the spread of the infectious

illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. surgeon general.

But that's not the only reason Americans may want to think twice about using masks, one expert told MarketWatch.

Most people don't know how to use face masks correctly, and a rush to buy masks could prevent the people who need them most — health care providers — from getting them, said Dr. Amesh Adalja, a scholar at the Center for Health Security at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In fact the U.S. surgeon general recently urged the public to [“STOP BUYING MASKS!”](#) “They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if healthcare providers can't get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!” wrote Surgeon General Jerome Adams on Twitter [TWTR, -2.92%](#)

The CDC said last month it doesn't recommend people use face masks, making the announcement on the same day that [first case of person-to-person transmission of coronavirus](#) was reported in the U.S. The CDC recommendation on masks stands, a spokesman told MarketWatch Wednesday, even with the first reported case of a COVID-19 infection in an individual in California who had not been to China or been exposed to a person diagnosed with the virus.

“The virus is not spreading in the general community,” Dr. Nancy Messonnier, director of the Center for the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, said in a Jan. 30 briefing. “We don't routinely recommend the use of face masks by the public to prevent respiratory illness. And we certainly are not recommending that at this time for this new virus.”

HHS Secretary Alex Azar said Tuesday, “Our advice remains as it has been that the average American does not need a N95 mask. These are really more for health care providers.”

N95 masks are tighter-fitting than surgical masks and protect against small particles and large droplets, according to the [CDC](#). Azar said that there are only 30 million N95 masks in the national stockpile, adding that there are “as many as 300 million masks needed in the U.S. for health care workers.”

There were 86 cases of COVID-19 and two reported deaths in the U.S., [as of Monday](#).

See also: [Alpha Pro Tech's stock rockets as coronavirus outbreak leads to a big spike in face mask orders](#)

Americans don't seem to be heeding health officials' advice: Walgreens [WBA, -3.76%](#) and Duane Reade pharmacies have seen increased demand for face masks and hand sanitizer across the country, said Alexandra Brown, a spokeswoman for Walgreens, which owns both chains. “We continually and closely monitor these types of situations to ensure that we have sufficient supply of those products,” she said.

Several sites have sold out of face masks entirely.

Target's [TGT, -1.37%](#) brand of face masks, priced at \$5.99 for a 10-pack, were out of stock on its site as of Thursday. A Target spokeswoman declined to comment on when the face masks would be back in stock.

There were still some face masks available on Amazon [AMZN, -7.59%](#) last Thursday, though many were quickly becoming out of stock. A pack of 20 3M [MMM, -2.18%](#) face masks was available for \$129 on Thursday morning, but by midday it had sold out. In April last year the same pack of masks cost \$9.99, according to [camelcamelcamel.com](#), a site that tracks historic prices of goods sold on Amazon.

Amazon and 3M did not respond to requests for comment on when customers could expect to purchase masks that are currently out of stock.

To protect against a mask shortage, Home Depot [HD, -0.57%](#) [HD, -0.57%](#) [HD, -0.57%](#) [HD, -0.57%](#) [HD, -0.57%](#) has "limited purchase quantity to 10 [masks] per person to best serve as many customers as possible," said Margaret Smith, a Home Depot spokeswoman. "Our merchandising and supply chain teams are working hard to replenish these items as quickly as possible."

CVS [CVS, -3.00%](#) has also seen a surge in sales of face masks. The demand "may cause shortages at some store locations and we'll re-supply those stores as quickly as possible," Stephanie Cunha, a CVS spokeswoman, said last month.

Adalja applauded the CDC's recommendation on face masks. "Even during H1N1 [flu epidemic], there was no recommendation to wear face masks," he said. They "end up creating a false sense of security and most people don't wear them appropriately," he said.

People who are not in the medical field who wear the masks often come in contact with germs when they lift the mask up to eat or slip their fingers under the mask to blow their nose, he said.

Panic-driven demand for face masks, Adalja said, is particularly worrisome because it could have "a negative supply shock" effect on hospital personnel who need these masks more than the general public.

Like the surgeon general, Adalja said, "the best ways [for the general public] to protect themselves are the basic hygienic measures." That includes washing your hands regularly and covering sneezes and coughs. But if you are "sick and need to go out you should wear a mask."

Instead of wearing face masks, the general public should "be vigilant to the symptoms and signs of this novel coronavirus, that is, a fever and cough, and if you have those symptoms, please call your health-care provider," Messonnier said last month.

“We want our actions to be evidence-based and appropriate to the current circumstance,” she said, which she said did not justify the use of face masks for people who have not been directly exposed to the virus.

The CDC has said it [expects to see more coronavirus cases in the U.S.](#) “It’s not so much a question of if ... but rather more a question of exactly when this will happen and how many people in this country will have severe illness, Messonnier said on Feb. 25.

There are still many unknowns about how this strain of coronavirus, 2019-nCoV, spreads, but when person-to-person spread has occurred in the past, “it is thought to have happened via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how influenza and other respiratory pathogens spread,” the [CDC said on its website](#).

Like the CDC, the World Health Organization [advises](#) people to wear a mask only if they are displaying symptoms of coronavirus or “taking care of a person with suspected 2019-nCoV infection.”

In a separate update last month, the WHO gave instructions for how to appropriately wear and dispose of face masks. WHO also [noted](#), “However, the use of a mask alone is insufficient to provide the adequate level of protection and other equally relevant measures should be adopted.”

WHO advises people who wish to wear a mask to place the mask “carefully to cover mouth and nose and tie securely to minimise any gaps between the face and the mask,” avoid touching the mask while you’re wearing it, and dispose of masks as soon as they become damp or humid. When removing the face mask, WHO recommends that people “do not touch the front but remove the lace from behind.”

Worldwide, 89,197 people have been infected with COVID-19, and at least 3,048 have died [as of Monday](#).

This story was originally published on Jan. 30 and has been updated.

<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-cdc-says-americans-dont-have-to-wear-facemasks-because-of-coronavirus-2020-01-30>