Want to defeat COVID-19? You can do your part when you #MaskUp

AUG 3, 2020

Susan R. Bailey, MD
Past President

Turning the tide against COVID-19 is a goal all of us can get behind—and you can do your part by getting behind a mask. It is absolutely time to #MaskUp.

As physicians, it is critical that we help our patients understand their risks for transmission through clear and simple communication firmly rooted in science. The AMA is partnering with other leading health organizations on #MaskUp to encourage more people to minimize the spread of COVID-19 by wearing masks.

Physicians are guided by science and evidence. And in the case of SARS-CoV-2, the data is overwhelming that covering your nose and mouth—along with practicing physical distancing, washing your hands frequently, avoiding large gatherings and limiting time spent indoors with others—provides the best protection against further spread.

Putting it simply, wearing a mask saves lives.

When we #MaskUp, we are doing our part to put COVID-19 behind us and to eventually regain the normality of our pre-pandemic lives. Physicians who inform and educate patients on the need to #MaskUp are playing a vital role in this effort. A campaign toolkit and additional AMA resources to achieve this goal are available here.

The need to #MaskUp has never been greater, because the rate of COVID-19 infection across our nation has never been more rapid. About a month ago, the U.S. reported about 40,000 newly confirmed cases of COVID-19 each day, certainly an alarming figure. But by mid-July, that rate had soared to more than 70,000 infections per day, a threshold our country had never reached before but one we are in danger of exceeding in the days and weeks ahead.

Physicians can lead the charge to reverse this trend by helping patients fully understand how COVID-19 transmission occurs, and the steps they can take to minimize their risk of infection, through clear
and simple communication rooted in evidence-based science. This approach will dispel myths and replace misinformation while fostering a spirit of cooperation, reinforcing the steps we know will limit the spread of the virus. One of the most important steps is wearing a mask whenever we leave home.

While our base of knowledge about the SARS-CoV-2 virus is still expanding, we know the primary means of transmission lies with tiny respiratory droplets produced during close face-to-face contact, when infected people talk, cough, sneeze, sing or raise their voices. Even normal breathing patterns put microbes in the air.

Wearing a cloth face covering or a similar type of face mask over the nose and mouth helps prevent these droplets from both traveling through and lingering in the air, where they pose a risk of infection to others. Research has shown that people who have contracted COVID-19 are contagious before symptoms emerge, and that others have spread the disease without ever developing symptoms.

Covering your nose and mouth each and every time you are out in public protects others against exposure to respiratory droplets you might be breathing out. People do not need an N95 mask to make a difference.

Evidence that cloth masks are effective in reducing COVID-19 transmission rates is found in abundance in this July 14 JAMA editorial, which reaches this conclusion: “At this critical juncture when COVID-19 is resurging, broad adoption of cloth face coverings is a civic duty, a small sacrifice reliant on a highly effective low-tech solution that can help turn the tide favorably in national and global efforts against COVID-19.”

Medical researchers are pressing the search for both a vaccine to prevent a SARS-CoV-2 infection and an effective treatment for those who contract it. Until those advances are achieved, we must remember that we are not powerless in responding to the most serious public health crisis in our lifetimes. Wearing a mask and following evidence-based public health interventions will reduce transmission of the virus and save lives.

I urge you to join this effort, and to join me, the broader health community, and people from across our nation as we all #MaskUp!