

The 6 things doctors want patients to know about masks

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There has been a turning point in the U.S. with [many states mandating](#) everyone to wear masks to curb the spread of COVID-19. However, misinformation and mixed signals about masks continue to circulate. This has threatened to drown out the growing body of evidence that shows wearing masks can help fight SARS-CoV-2. Physicians want to clear up those misunderstandings to get everyone to [#MaskUp](#).

Five AMA members took time to discuss what they want people to know about mask wearing to help clear up any misinformation. They are:

- Ricardo Correa, MD, endocrinology fellowship program director and the director for diversity at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Phoenix.
- Meena Davuluri, MD, MPH, a urologist and health outcomes fellow at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York City.
- Pratistha Koirala, MD, PhD, an ob-gyn resident at Danbury Hospital.
- Nicole Riddle, MD, a staff pathologist at Tampa General Hospital for Ruffolo, Hooper and Associates in Tampa, Florida, and associate professor and associate pathology residency program director at University of South Florida Health.
- Megan Srinivas, MD, MPH, an infectious diseases specialist and translational health policy research fellow at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Here is what these physician experts had to say.

Masks are vital to preventing spread

It is important for everyone to understand “the very basic level of why they should wear a mask,” said Dr. Srinivas. “A lot of the reasons people aren’t wearing it is because of the mixed messaging we’re getting from our state, local and national leaders.”

“The most important thing that we can get across for our patients is clearing that misconception and those falsehoods and just telling them how masks are effective and that they in fact are safe,” she added.

Dr. Davuluri, a urologist, uses her workplace humor to draw on an analogy to illustrate efficacy of masks.

“If two individuals are standing across from each other and neither are wearing pants, if the person across from you urinates, you will get wet,” said Dr. Davuluri. “If you are wearing pants and the person across from you urinates, you will be partially protected. If both individuals are wearing pants, you will be completely protected and remain dry.”

“It’s the same for mask wearing. If neither individual is wearing a mask, you will both be exposed,” she said. “If one person is wearing a mask, you will be partially protected. If both individuals are wearing a mask, both will be protected from being exposed to the virus.”

The bottom line, added Dr. Riddle, is that “masks really do prevent the spread of disease, specifically this virus that we’re all fighting. ... They really do save lives—yours and others.”

The AMA is partnering with other leading health organizations to encourage people to [mask up to stop the spread of COVID-19](https://patients.ama-assn.org/public-health/infectious-diseases/6-things-doctors-want-patients-know-about-masks).

This is not a political statement

“The most common pushback that we’re feeling right now is that there is a politicizing of the use of a mask. This has nothing to do with a political party,” said Dr. Correa. “People need to understand that this is a public health problem and it has nothing to do with the election of 2020. This is happening across the entire world.”

“A mask is just about keeping yourself safe, keeping your family members safe, keeping your loved ones safe and keeping our community safe,” said Dr. Davuluri. “That's really what the mask is all about. It's not impinging on anyone's freedom or their rights. The only thing we really know is the best way to prevent this disease is by wearing a mask.”

In a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update,” experts shared [how to make your voice heard to encourage public use of masks](#).

It's OK to wear for long periods of time

“The most common pushback that I get, where I am, is that masks are uncomfortable or concern about if it's safe to be wearing a mask for so many hours of the day,” said Dr. Koirala. “Talking about my own mask-wearing is important and reminding them that their physicians wear them too.”

“You can really wear them without fear of deoxygenating or going into an asthmatic fit for most people,” said Dr. Riddle, adding that “people can wear them whether they're exercising or in labor or doing surgery for 14 hours—there really isn't an excuse to not wear one for almost everyone.”

Cover your nose and mouth

“One of the things that I'd like to see is more people covering their entire nose and mouth,” said Dr. Koirala. “I see many people who just cover their mouth and they don't cover their nose, and that is just not going to be as effective in terms of protecting themselves.”

“Masks are worn to protect others,” said Dr. Correa, adding that “If you care about others, you should wear a mask.”

Learn from AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, [about why it's time to #MaskUp](#).

Know when to wear a mask

“The hardest thing, aside from just understanding why masks are important, is a lot of patients struggle to know when to wear a mask,” said Dr. Davuluri.

In April 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated its advice on mask-wearing. According to the CDC, both fully vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals can safely unmask while:

- Walking, running, hiking or biking outside alone or with members of the same household.
- Attending a small outdoor gathering with fully vaccinated family and friends.

People who are fully vaccinated have additional safe options for outdoor maskless activities. Someone who is fully vaccinated can safely skip the mask while:

- Attending a small outdoor gathering with a mix of fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people.
- Dining at an outdoor restaurant with friends from multiple households.

For these activities, unvaccinated people should continue to wear masks and practice physical distancing, says the CDC. Everyone—vaccinated or not—should also mask up when attending a crowded, outdoor event such as a concert, parade or sporting event.

The CDC guidance indicates that it is still important for everyone, fully vaccinated or not, to wear a mask while inside a public space. That includes going to the movies, attending church, getting on a plane, riding the bus, taking an exercise class at the gym or getting a haircut.

Learn more from the CDC about choosing safer activities during COVID-19.

Medicine changes as we know more

“There's just been a lot of whiplash in terms of what people have been saying, because at the beginning of the pandemic, people were saying not to wear masks, and now all the health experts are saying that you should wear masks,” said Dr. Koirala. This is when physicians need to remind patients “that this is part of the scientific process as we’ve

learned more and more about COVID-19.”

“Medicine changes and it evolves,” she said. “The more we learn about something, the better we’re able to treat it.”