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MASKS AN OPTION FOR COVID-19 HOTSPOTS

As metropolitan Melbourne enters a six-week lockdown period, the AMA is advising residents in Melbourne that mask use, where physical distancing cannot be guaranteed, is another useful tool, when combined with physical distancing, to limit COVID-19 transmission.

Dr Tony Bartone, AMA President and a Melbourne GP, said masks offer some benefit when using public transport or in crowded locations such as shops, markets, and indeed anywhere where people cannot remain 1.5 metres apart.

“This is especially the case in those suburbs where we know community transmission is high,” Dr Bartone said.

“Isolation, physical distancing, and regularly washing your hands is more effective at reducing transmission than masks. Furthermore, it must be made very clear - masks are NOT a silver bullet, particularly when not worn correctly.

“However, the worsening situation in Melbourne hotspots means everybody must be extra vigilant and extra careful to minimise the risk of spread of the virus. Mask use is just one additional way that safety precautions against transmission can be achieved.

“If masks are worn, it is vitally important to learn how to properly fit and wear masks.

“Always wash your hands before applying a mask, and strap the mask behind your ears. Masks must cover the mouth and nose.

“Make sure the mask is fitted tightly. A loose mask is ineffective. Do not remove your mask if you are within 1.5 metres of other people. Do not use masks while exercising.

“Do not wear a mask that is damaged, wet, or old.”

Dr Bartone said there has been considerable debate about the value of masks in containing the spread of the virus, but there is no debate that masks, where appropriately used and correctly fitted, do provide some level of protection in areas of sustained community transmission.

“Masks are not a panacea. There must also be hand hygiene, cough etiquette, and compliance with public health orders. Complacency with mask use can be more dangerous than not wearing them.

“The AMA wants a detailed and instructive public education campaign on the best type of masks or face shields and how to correctly use them.

“We also call on the National Cabinet to work with the States and Territories that have experienced increased infection rates to maintain sufficient supplies of masks and other PPE for those in these areas.

“We are still getting reports of frontline GPs still having to purchase their own supplies in some jurisdictions.

“All doctors and healthcare professionals in all hotspot settings should be assured of a regular and reliable stock of masks to use. That should now also include the available supply of face shields, which is an appropriate additional measure, where indicated, for all healthcare professionals.

“Indeed, face shields are an appropriate measure for any other member of the public who has a public-facing position within the community during this time, and are a useful and perhaps a better alternative to face masks where close contact cannot be avoided.

“No doctor should be bullied or intimidated in the wearing of a mask by a service administrator, and patients must observe the safety instructions given by doctors and other health personnel.

“Masks should be made available urgently to people who cannot afford them.

“As we have seen in recent weeks in Melbourne, COVID-19 is a deadly virus that can spread very quickly to other areas and potentially interstate.

“The other States and Territories cannot and must not be complacent. Melbourne is showing how unpredictable and dangerous the virus can be.

“A lockdown for the second time so soon after the relaxation of restrictions is absolutely devastating for the Victorian community - and should be a clear message to the rest of the country.

“We recognise the enormous imposition on people - on their mental health and wellbeing, as well as socially and financially. The economic consequences will be untold, and will persist for a very long time.

“The AMA urges all Australians to show compassion and empathy to those caught up in lockdowns – and support all those who are working around the clock to control the outbreaks.

“No person or group is to blame for outbreaks of the coronavirus.

“This is a worldwide pandemic, and the health leadership response in Australia at every level of government is the envy of most other countries,” Dr Bartone said.

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