

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Rarely Known Facts on Face Masks and Coronavirus (Covid-19)”

Health officials push the wearing of masks and gloves to stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). Shockingly, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that health workers worldwide will need at least 89 million masks every month to treat COVID-19 cases. There are already shortages of masks for medical professionals around the world, a problem that will likely get worse. Further, the World Health Organization's advice has remained unchanged since the start of the global outbreak: wash your hands, don't touch your face, and keep your distance. The WHO says it is advisable to wear a protective mask in public if you suspect you are infected or someone you are caring for is, in which case the advice is to stay home whenever possible. However, there are limits to how a mask can protect you from being infected and experts recently said that, “Wearing masks and gloves as a precaution against coronavirus is ineffective, unnecessary for the vast majority of people, and may even spread infections faster.” But this message has reached very few people. As well as diminishing stocks sorely needed by medical professionals, experts say masks can give people who wear them a false sense of security. Many people who wear them don't follow the official advice of washing their hands thoroughly first, ensuring it's airtight and not to touch it once it's on. People are always readjusting their masks and that has the potential to contaminate them. Some experts also say that gloves, similarly, don't greatly heighten protection and could even end up making you sick. A Johns Hopkins expert said, “If people cannot stop touching their face, gloves will not serve a purpose. Gloves are not a substitute for washing your hands. If you're wearing gloves, you're not washing your hands. Surgical gloves should only be used in a medical setting.” One 2015 study in the *American Journal of Infection Control* found that people touch their face on average 20 times an hour. The first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Wuhan, China, in early to mid-December, linked to a live animal and seafood market located next to a major train station. Three countries have kept the virus in check, and they are Vietnam, South Korea and Taiwan. They have one other thing in common: They've each managed to contain their COVID-19 infections, preventing the new coronavirus from reaching epidemic proportions within their borders. South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam each recognized the novel coronavirus as a threat from the outset, and aggressively tested suspected cases and tracked potential new infections.

In the America that I love, finding cases and isolating them so they're not transmitted forward is the tried and true way of controlling an infectious disease outbreak.

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