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U.S. Issues Guidelines on Use of Face Masks in Flu Outbreak

By [DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.](#)

If a [flu](#) pandemic ever emerges, surgical masks “should be considered” by anyone entering a crowd, and thicker industrial masks “should be considered” for anyone taking care of the sick, federal health officials said yesterday as they finally released guidelines for mask use.

The new instructions were vague, officials from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) conceded, even though they have been debating internally for years — in the face of a lethal strain of H5N1 flu emerging overseas — whether to recommend masks.

At the last minute, in the brief summary of the new guidelines meant for the public, the words “wear a face mask if” were changed to “a face mask should be considered if.”

Part of the hesitation, officials said, is that even though common sense says masks protect against flu germs, there is little scientific data proving they do.

“If there were a fail-safe, perfect solution, we’d recommend it absolutely,” said Dr. Michael Bell, chief of infection control for the national preparedness center at the C.D.C. “But there isn’t a crisp, hard guideline. It’s not like a seat belt, something you should wear at all times.”

Also, officials fear that if millions of nervous citizens rush out to buy masks, that will create shortages for health care workers, who need them more.

“I would not like people to stockpile to the extent that they’d cut off the supply to hospital workers,” Dr. Bell said.

The federal government is still building a mask stockpile, as are many state and city health departments and private hospitals.

The guidelines released yesterday re-emphasized earlier suggestions that in a pandemic, people should shun crowds, avoid close contact with anyone at work or school, and stay home if they are sick, or anyone in their household is sick.

They should also wash their hands frequently, use hand sanitizers and cover their noses and mouths when coughing or sneezing.

Masks are most useful, said Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the disease control centers, when placed on people who are already sick — to keep in droplets from their sneezes and coughs. They are also important for health care workers or family members tending anyone with flu, especially during potentially dangerous procedures like giving nebulizer treatment to an asthmatic child or suctioning a patient with a chronic breathing problem.

But, Dr. Bell said, “they do provide some protection, for example, during that unfortunate moment in the grocery store line when some little kid sneezes in your face.”

Masks come in two types. Surgical masks are the thin disposable or washable cloth or paper ones worn by surgeons and dentists, costing a few cents each. N-95 respirators are thicker fiber masks, often round or duck-billed in shape, worn by construction workers to keep out dust or paint, and by hospital nurses working with infectious patients. They are certified to keep out 95 percent of all particles and usually cost \$1 or more.

Other countries’ pandemic plans rely more heavily on masks. The stockpile in the United States contains about 100 million N-95s and 52 million surgical masks, but France, with a population one-fifth that of the United States, has stockpiled 300 million N-95s and one billion surgical masks.

Dr. Didier Houssin, chief medical officer for flu at the Paris Hospital Center, said at an [avian flu](#) conference in February that his country’s emphasis was “not so much from medical reasons as from psychological and political reasons.”

Dr. Jeffrey Levi, executive director of Trust for America’s Health, a nonpartisan health advocacy group, said he would like to see the United States buy more masks and demand them in children’s sizes. The H5N1 flu has disproportionately killed children and teenagers, and N-95 masks, which must fit closely to work, are not made in small sizes.

But masks can become contaminated by sneezes and soggy on humid days, and it is unclear whether changing them carelessly is more dangerous than not wearing them. They also require a lot of “social engineering,” Dr. Bell said. If they are recommended only for the sick, for example, everyone may avoid them because it marks a person as infectious.

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