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COMMENTARY

COVID-19: When to Wear a Mask and When You Don't Have To

Arthur L. Caplan, PhD

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This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Hi. I'm Art Caplan. I'm at the Division of Medical Ethics at the NYU School of Medicine. However, I'm talking today from Ridgefield, Connecticut, where I live and where I'm isolating during this COVID-19 epidemic.

As most of you do, I had to go out to the supermarket. When there, I encountered a fair number of people who were not wearing a mask [while shopping]. The supermarket I go to will not allow you to enter without a mask — and they mean it. They will block you physically at the door if you don't have a mask and give you one before you can enter.

Obviously, there are all kinds of people in all kinds of places around the United States — and other countries too — who are not wearing a mask. When is it ethically acceptable not to wear a mask? When should we expect, morally, that you do wear a mask? How does that vary whether you're at the supermarket or at a protest?

There are some basic rules that make some sense about wearing a mask. I don't think they have to be political. They should not be statements about whether you support one person or another person in terms of their policies. It's not a Democrat or Republican issue but a public health issue.

When don't you need a mask? Well, I'm not wearing one now. I'm alone in my house. I know the people I live with in this house are not infected. Some of them have been tested, but all of them have been here for about 3 months so they would have shown symptoms by now. They're not going out where they're going to get infected.

Around your house, if you're controlling where people have been, you don't need to wear a mask.

Out jogging, I see people yelling at dog walkers and joggers to put on a mask. If you're more than 10 feet away from people while you're running, you don't need a mask. If you're walking your dog and you're not physically near anybody, you don't need a mask.

We know that droplets can convey the virus, and we know that perhaps 6 feet might be a little on the conservative side about how far things can go or blow. If you're pretty far away from somebody, I think you're fine to jog, walk the dog, and do outdoor activities.

I even think you could probably play tennis without wearing a mask, as long as you maintain distance throughout the entire match. You might even get away with things like basketball and probably golf. There are sports where I don't think you have to wear a mask as long as you're socially distancing.

At the other end, if I go to a protest and I'm arm in arm with my fellow protesters, or if I'm a policeman who is in a line right across from those protesters and they're right in my face, yelling, screaming, and spitting at me, everybody ought to be wearing a mask.

It's irresponsible to go out to these peaceful protests, either to guard them or participate in them, and not wear a mask. It's common sense. A mask doesn't interfere with your ability to protect the protesters, protect the buildings, or to get your protest heard.

There are people who argue that they want to get out there for social justice and don't want to maintain social distancing, which is difficult to do at protests involving tens of thousands of people. I concede that. Wear a mask. Put your mask on anyway.

I'm so strident about this that I've suggested that if you go out in mass public events [without a mask], whether you're at the lake, the bar, or a protest, and you get sick or you go home and make others sick, then you ought to think

about [volunteering to go to the end of the healthcare line](#), because you've acted so irresponsibly and dangerously.

I know people are saying that [going to the back of the treatment line] is not practical and nobody's going to do it. But the point is that we need to take personal responsibility. That's a value we could stand for in medicine and in public health: Protect your neighbor, the weak, and the vulnerable.

These are important values. We should speak up for them to our patients, to the world, and to officials who don't insist on masking as part of what it means to go out in public with many other people around.

Wear a mask. It's the least you can do if you're out in public with many people around and you can't socially distance. It's the right thing to do and it's the responsible thing to do. When I go to the supermarket, I'm glad they're making us do it.

I'm Art Caplan. I'm at the Division of Medical Ethics at the Grossman School of Medicine. Thanks for watching.

Arthur L. Caplan, PhD, is director of the Division of Medical Ethics at New York University Langone Medical Center and School of Medicine. He is the author or editor of 35 books and 750 peer-reviewed articles as well as a frequent commentator in the media on bioethical issues.

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