Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness

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Letter to the Editor

Cite this article: Ha K-M (2022) Wearing a face mask in Korea. *Disaster Med Public Health Prep* **16**: 2214. doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/dmp.2021.243.

First published online: 26 July 2021

Keywords:
Disaster medicine; disease outbreaks; emergency preparedness

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Wearing a Face Mask in Korea

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Wearing a face mask has largely helped to prevent the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)/coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) from infected patients to others in many regions, as well as to protect noninfected individuals from becoming infected. However, the issue of where the local residents should wear face masks has not been clearly defined and varies among nations.[1]

For example, South Korea (hereinafter Korea) has to some extent successfully curbed the spread of COVID-19 by making people wear face masks in public places. Here arises a key question whether Koreans should continue to wear face masks to control the spread of COVID-19.

The issue of wearing face masks can be addressed with 2 distinctive approaches. Under the "always-wear-a-face mask" approach, an individual should wear a face mask whenever they go out, whereas under the "properly-wear-a-face-mask" approach, an individual should wear a face mask only whenever it is necessary.

When reflecting government guidelines, industry strategies, mass media coverage, and local response in Korea, the nation needs to replace or at least supplement its current approach of requiring people to always wear a face mask with that of urging people to properly wear a face mask to strengthen its efforts against the spread of COVID-19. Rather than having to always wear a face mask, which causes breathing difficulties or which is practically impossible, common people must know when exactly such practice is necessary based not just on local culture but also on scientific evidence.

The wearing of a face mask during the COVID-19 outbreak is a matter of life and death for everyone. Therefore, awareness programs must be initiated with the instructions on the proper use of face masks during emergency situations, and such information should be made to reach the public through online programs or electronic public announcements. Moreover, appropriate training and exercises should be provided to the public through the virtual platforms.

Korea serves as a good example for other nations faced with an insufficient supply of face masks at either the national or local levels. Also, Western countries, which have not been familiar with wearing face masks even during the outbreak of pandemic, may learn a lesson from Korea. The smart use of face masks will contribute to the international response to the COVID-19 outbreak by helping control the spread of the coronavirus effectively.[2]

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