

I am in favor of everyone wearing a mask when inside any building other than their home and when outside in any place where they could easily accidentally find themselves less than 6 feet from another person (who is not their housemate) without warning (example—on a public sidewalk that has doors or side streets opening onto it.)

When people are not wearing their masks correctly, it is helpful to hear the backstory, the reason why. It is not the same for everyone, as I have found out in the clinic where I work.

Some people have difficulty keeping their masks covering their noses. In some cases it is because the mask is too small and a simple jaw-opening pulls down. These folks need to get bigger or stretchier masks.

Some masks fall down because they are too large. If they have ear loops it sometimes helps to make an X in the loop in front of the ear. If that is not enough one can use a twisty tie to connect the loops behind the head.

Some people take their masks off because they cannot breathe through them. This is sometimes because the mask has two or three layers. When this is the case, it can help to cut out the inner layers and just breathe through the outermost layer. The most effective mask is the one that gets used.

If a person feels they cannot breathe through a single-layer cloth mask, it may be necessary to check their oxygen saturation to find out if there is a medical problem to address—such as under-treated asthma or heart disease—or whether the feeling is coming from PTSD: old leftover memories of almost asphyxiating (at birth, during anaesthesia, due to violence or trauma, or otherwise.) Sometimes a medical professional or a therapist or a meditation teacher can be helpful.

Some people do not wear the masks because they feel defiant of death, or of authority, or are unable to care right now about protecting other people. A good answer for them is: “sorry, but you have to. We won’t let you endanger Mendocino County.”

If we decide to enforce mask-wearing—which is a very good idea, considering that masking and social distancing have been shown to work, while COVID-19 tests and vaccines are imperfect and hard to come by—then let’s combine enforcement with awareness of the reasons for non-compliance, so we can help point each person toward a real solution that makes compliance possible.

Respectfully submitted,  
Jennifer Kreger MD