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COUNTY OFFICIALS: THE RIGHT MASK MATTERS WHEN IT COMES TO COVID-19 PROTECTION

WINNEMUCCA, Nev.— Humboldt County officials say the right mask will result in the right protection against the COVID-19 virus.

Public health experts are warning that the single-layer cloth masks that have become popular during the pandemic actually do not provide enough protection against COVID-19, especially in the face of the omicron variant.

Still, they acknowledge that any face covering is still better than wearing nothing at all.

“COVID is airborne, so the quality of a mask does matter,” said Humboldt County Health Officer Charles Stringham, MD. On the other hand, Dr. Stringham said a single-layer cloth mask “provides very little protection against the delta variant, and certainly against the very contagious omicron variant.”

Dr. Stringham advised local residents to upgrade to N95, KN95 or KF94 masks.

“These masks provide the ability to filter contaminants,” said Dr. Stringham.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), N95 respirators (commonly referred to as “masks”) are approved by the U.S. National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to [filter at least 95% of airborne particles](#).

The Chinese standard, KN95, also filters 95% of aerosol particulates—hence the “95” designation—while South Korean KF94 masks filter 94% of aerosol particulates.

Dr. Stringham said N95, KN95 and KF94 masks are made with an electrostatically-charged material that actually catches smaller particles—preventing their wearers from inhaling them—and filtering microscopic particles that are just a few nanometers in size.

In comparison, cloth masks can be good at filtering large droplets, but smaller particles and aerosols potentially carrying airborne viruses can still pass through.

“Again,” said Dr. Stringham, “cloth masks are still better than not wearing a mask at all, but because N95 masks filter 95 percent of particles, my recommendation is to go for the upgraded mask.”

For those struggling to get their hands on N95, KN95 or KF94 masks, Dr. Stringham said double-masking with a fitted three-ply surgical mask *and* a cloth mask can boost protection on a temporary basis.

With the arrival of the delta and now omicron variants in the United States, the demand for “95” masks has increased; unfortunately, so has the output of counterfeit masks.

The CDC has produced a [guide to spotting real vs. fake NIOSH-approved masks](#). The NIOSH also has a [list of approved N95 respirators](#) often sold at some drugstores and home improvement stores.

Dr. Stringham said even the best masks won’t provide protection if they are not fitted correctly. Masks should cover both the nose *and* mouth, with the mask secured under the chin. Masks should also fit snugly against the face, with no large openings or gaps around the nose, mouth or sides of the face. The [CDC’s guidelines on effectively wearing masks](#) are available here.

Nevada State Epidemiologist Melissa Peek-Bullock shared during a news briefing in late December that omicron is the prevalent variant across the country and that “we expect to see the same pattern in Nevada over the coming weeks.”

State biostatistician Kyra Morgan said the more-contagious omicron variant was responsible for 25 percent of test samples from Nevadans that were genetically sequenced. “And it could have gone up since then,” she added.

So far, the latest COVID surge is primarily affecting Clark and Washoe counties, but officials said they expect the omicron variant to spread to the state’s rural areas in the coming weeks. As of January 4, six omicron cases have been identified in Elko County.

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