The use of masks and personal protective equipment (PPE)

As part of a comprehensive COVID-19 prevention strategy

The use of PPE in NSW

- Within NSW currently, masks are mandatory on public transport and recommended in situations where physical distancing of 1.5 meters cannot be comfortably maintained.

- The Australian Government mandates the use of facemasks on all domestic flights.

Using personal protective equipment (PPE)

Positive Life NSW understands that there are different rules from state to state regarding the mandatory use of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as disposable and reusable masks within the community. PPE will remain a key strategy to prevent community transmission of COVID-19. The correct use of PPE, as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy, has supported the low levels of community transmission across Australia.

Positive Life understands the translation of using PPE from complex clinical settings into the general community presents many challenges, and endorses the position articulated by the NSW Government on the correct use of PPE. We emphasise the need to address community concerns about the use of PPE with evidence-based approaches.

The misuse of PPE could potentially build a false sense of security, undermine or encourage people not to follow the primary prevention guidelines and may increase the risk for the acquisition of coronavirus due to the incorrect use of PPE equipment. We also highlight the importance of correctly disposing of masks into a secure container or bin after use as an added precaution to protect others.

If you want to talk about your concerns regarding coronavirus as a person living with HIV, or have questions about your use of PPE, please contact a Positive Life Treatments or Peer Support Officer, on (02) 9206-2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or email contact@positivelife.org.au

The appropriate use of face masks

Hand washing and physical distancing have been the key strategies stop the spread of SARS-CoV-2 that causes COVID-19. The government policies of quarantine, and restricting people's movement, have also helped keep Australians safe.

The evidence on the effectiveness about facemasks was somewhat slow to emerge. However, by the second half of 2020 nearly all governments in Australia had recommended the use of masks on public transport and in densely populated spaces such as retail areas. In February 2021, the NSW Government mandated the use of facemasks in the following settings:

- on public transport (including taxis and ride share) and public transport waiting areas in Greater Sydney (including the Blue Mountains, Wollongong and the Central Coast)
- at airports
- on domestic commercial aircraft that land at, or take off from, a NSW airport while in NSW.

In other environments, it is up to the individual to choose if they use masks in NSW as an additional precaution in reducing risks in spaces that are more confined or where distancing is not easy to maintain. Examples include supermarkets, shops with narrow aisles, as a passenger in a car, for people who have respiratory symptoms, have a chronic health condition, are in an age or identified high risk category, and are leaving their place of residence for an essential purpose or living with someone who has respiratory symptoms.

All masks should fit the face **with a complete seal over the nose, down each side of the face and under the chin** so only filtered air is breathed in through the mask. Men may need to trim or shave their beard entirely to ensure proper fitting. Once in place, the mask should not be removed until the identified period of risk is over, such as when you return home, or until the manufacturer's specified time says the mask should be discarded or cleaned.

Reusable masks made of waterproof material (ideally three layers) afford slightly better protection as they are less likely to allow the virus to reach your nose and face when they become damp from moisture in your breath. These reusable masks should be removed, cleaned/washed and filters replaced as per the manufacturer's instructions. This will vary between the different types of masks, the material they are manufactured from, the level of protection they provide, and if they are manufactured or homemade.

Before placing the mask on your face, make sure that your hands have been washed, then place the mask over your face ensuring that all surfaces of the mask fit to the face snugly and secure it. The mask should not be removed or shifted until you are in a lower risk environment. Remove the mask by using the securing ties from behind your head or ears and not by touching the front of the mask. Dispose of it immediately in a bin, and thoroughly wash your hands.

Limitations of disposable masks

These masks are manufactured of material that is not designed to be cleaned and should be discarded immediately after only one use. Be mindful that once used, a disposable mask is possibly contaminated and should be disposed of in a waste container where no one else will need to touch it. It is important you wash your hands after removing your mask, after touching any object or surface or after disposing of a mask.

Disposable masks are also usually cheaper e.g. paper-like masks. Moving them to below your nose or chin, to answer the phone, smoke, drink, or order something at a café compromises the mask and you must not put this mask back onto your face. It has potentially become contaminated and could transfer the virus to your face, nose and eyes. This means, the mask should be removed carefully from behind your head, not touching the front of the mask.

If you use disposable masks, you will need to carry several masks with you. If you use your phone while you have the mask on, you will need to clean your phone before using it again, after you take off your mask.

Use of disposable gloves

Gloves are not a replacement for the recommended hand hygiene practice of washing hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds, or the use of a 60% alcohol based sanitiser. Their use outside clinical or usual cleaning activities can compromise their protective value.

Gloves are only useful as a reminder not to touch your face. If you are wearing gloves and touch your face, you have transferred organisms to your face via the glove. Slipping them on and off regularly also transfers organisms inside the glove.

For more information phone 02 9206 2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit www.positivelife.org.au

The voice of all people living with HIV

Positive Life NSW