



Skagit County Public Health

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Skagit County Public Health Report regarding face coverings or masks as a necessary and effective means to prevent the spread of COVID-19

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In late December 2019, an investigation of a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China resulted in the identification of a novel coronavirus, COVID-19. On January 21, 2020, the Washington State Department of Health reported the first case of COVID-19 in the United States, which occurred in Washington State. On March 10, 2020, the first Skagit County resident to be diagnosed with COVID-19 was confirmed. As is widely known, COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that can result in serious illness or death, and is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Since October 2020, COVID-19 case numbers among Skagit residents have risen at an alarming level, far greater than previous periods. In fact, nearly 1/3 of all Skagit cases occurred in November, while the first eight days of December had 295 diagnosed cases, which is a greater count than any full month prior to November.

Skagit County Historic COVID-19 Case Numbers by Month		
Month	Number of Cases	Percent of Cases to Date
December 1-8, 2020*	295	12.7%
November-20	758	32.7%
October-20	154	6.6%
September-20	91	3.9%
August-20	237	10.2%
July-20	264	11.4%
June-20	84	3.6%
May-20	97	4.2%
April-20	210	9.1%
March-20	128	5.5%
Total 3/10 - 12/8/20	2318	100.0%
*Note that December cases are for only the first 8 days of the month.		

In reviewing these case numbers, it is important to consider that anyone may become seriously ill from COVID-19, leading to risk of long-term health impacts or death. The extent of illness resulting from COVID-19 varies from person to person, but a risk for severe sickness is related to age. The Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes this risk increases steadily with age, but has removed a specific age threshold as it's not only people over the age of 65 who have a high vulnerability for severe illness. Also, the CDC notes that risk increases from underlying medical conditions, including, but limited to:

- Cancer
- Chronic kidney disease
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant
- Obesity
- Pregnancy
- Serious heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, or cardiomyopathies
- Sickle cell disease
- Smoking
- Type 2 diabetes

Every day Skagitonians take appropriate measures to protect ourselves and others at high risk, including:

- Maintaining at least 6 feet distance from others outside of their household
- Frequent handwashing with soap and water, or a hand sanitizer when soap and water aren't available
- Covering coughs and sneezes
- Consistent cleaning and disinfecting
- Wearing face coverings or masks in public settings and when around people outside of their household

By consistently following the above measures, many Skagitonians have prevented an even greater increase in the transmission of infection. This report is focusing on face coverings or masks as a necessary and effective means to prevent COVID-19 spread. We know COVID-19 is spread person-to-person through respiratory droplets or airborne particles. Respiratory droplets travel into the air when coughing, sneezing, talking, shouting, or singing. These droplets may land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or they may breathe in droplets. Face coverings and masks provide a simple barrier against respiratory droplets reaching others. Studies show that masks reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth.

In order to support this simple means to prevent COVID-19 transmission, in June 2020 a statewide requirement was established that all Washingtonians and visitors to the state wear facemasks or coverings in indoor public places such as stores, offices and restaurants. It also requires face coverings be used in outdoor settings where people cannot stay six feet apart from people of outside of their household. As cases began to rise this fall, Skagit County Health Officer, Dr. Howard Leibrand, detailed in a released statement:

“Skagit County, we’re in trouble. COVID-19 cases are rising at an alarming rate, and we need your help to reverse the trend and keep us out of major trouble....” Dr. Leibrand stressed the usefulness of masks in preventing spread: “Masks work. Mask work to protect you, protect those around you and allow us to interact more safely. The evidence is overwhelmingly clear that the better we are about mask use, the

less the disease will spread. For the majority of Skagitonians, a simple cloth face mask or covering is plenty effective at reducing disease transmission.”

Some people find face coverings uncomfortable to wear. Each person has a different level of tolerance. This tolerance often grows when wearing coverings for longer periods of time and can become to feel normal. Regardless, a slight, or even moderate, discomfort is a minor consideration compared to the wellbeing and life of ourselves, our loved ones and our neighbors.

As mentioned above, most Skagitonians consistently wear face coverings and follow other preventative measures. In some cases, people cannot wear masks due to medical conditions. However, a minority of residents without such health concerns are inconsistent in this practice. Others outright refuse to wear a face covering. In order to preserve community health, Skagit County Public Health is advising that the Skagit County Board of Health consider the adoption of a proposal to issue a Health Officer Order Violation Ordinance to provide for civil penalties for businesses and individuals violating an order requiring the wearing of masks in public places. This ordinance would enable local law enforcement and public health to take action when there is a refusal to abide by Health Officer Orders in situations that present a high risk of COVID-19 transmission. Please note that while this report focuses on face coverings and masks, the ordinance would also allow for civil penalties in response to a lack of compliance with statewide orders concerning:

- The allowable sizes of gathering
- Business-specific restrictions
- Requirements for events such as weddings

The ultimate goal of this ordinance is to promote the health and wellbeing of Skagitonians, and limit the spread of COVID-19, by addressing intransigent refusal to wear masks and face coverings in public places.