UW Health: Busting mask myths one question at a time

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MADISON, Wis. – Wearing a mask has proven to be one of the best means of protection society has against COVID-19, but with so much misinformation out there, how can the public separate fact from fiction?

UW Health and University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health experts are here to tackle some of those burning questions. For example –

Myth: Does wearing a mask cause someone to breathe in unsafe levels of carbon dioxide?

Fact: No, face coverings like medical masks, cloth face coverings, neck gators and hand-made masks are designed to be breathed through. In addition, medical professionals have been wearing masks for years – even more so during the pandemic – and there has been no evidence to suggest that carbon dioxide is a problem, according to Jeff Pothof, MD, chief quality officer at UW Health.

Myth: Since the Centers for Disease Control say that cloth masks won't protect someone from breathing air pollutants, like the recent wildfire smoke in the western United States, then it cannot protect against COVID-19.

Fact: No, these are not comparable circumstances, according to Ajay Sethi, PhD, master of public health program faculty director and associate professor of population health sciences, UW School of Medicine and Public Health.

The air in the western United States became so polluted from the wildfires that residents must wear N95 respirator masks to protect from breathing in smoke, ash and particulates which are much smaller than the droplets that COVID-19 are carried in. The N95 mask protects wearers against air pollution and airborne

illnesses like COVID-19.

A cloth mask has a different purpose, Sethi said. When someone with COVID-19 breathes out air, most of the coronavirus is in the respiratory droplets that are produced when talking, coughing, sneezing or singing. Since many people with COVID-19 are unaware they have it, the opportunity for spreading the coronavirus to others is significantly less when everyone in proximity of each other wear cloth masks, he said.

UW Health and the School of Medicine and Public Health urge the public to stay safe by following these key guidelines:

- Practice physical distancing by staying at least six feet away from people who do not live in your household.
- Wear a face mask if you plan to be around people who do not live in your household.
- Stay home whenever possible. Limit outings to essential needs such as groceries, exercise, medication, healthcare visits or essential work.
- If you have any symptoms (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat) stay home, physically distance and call your provider about getting tested.
- Do not attend large gatherings.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.

Interviews and B-roll with our myth busters are available upon request.