

DOCTORS WEIGH IN WITH DUELLING OPINIONS ON MANDATORY MASKS

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Regional council has passed a bylaw making masks mandatory across Halton in indoor public spaces starting July 22, with some exceptions.

But before unanimously approving the measure, councillors first heard from several local residents, including two doctors who weighed in on the matter with very different opinions. Georgetown physician and past-president of the Ontario Medical Association Dr. Nadia Alam spoke strongly in favour of mandatory masking, while Oakville doctor and infectious disease specialist Dr. Thomas Warren contended that it's not a necessary measure.

"People worry that masks aren't safe. However, decades of using masks

show that they are exceedingly safe for everyone, from children to those with respiratory diseases," said Alam, noting that she has asthma, but wore a mask for 18 hours the day before at the hospital.

"The worst people may experience is a dry throat from breathing through their mouths as they learn how to become used to wearing a mask. It takes some training. But my seven-year-old can do it, my 79 year old non-medical father can do it — so can everyone else."

She said some studies have shown that cloth masks can stop 50 to 90 per cent of respiratory droplets, depending on the construction and filtration of the mask.

"Even a paper towel can increase the filtration capacity of a cloth mask," she added, noting that such masks should be washed

daily in hot water, and people should always wash or sanitize their hands after touching a used mask.

But masks and face coverings aren't the only solution when it comes to stopping the spread of COVID-19, said Alam.

"Masks are not a cure-all — they have to be part of a comprehensive strategy of testing and tracing and source control of the infection," she said. "We have to use a multiplicity of measures to keep everyone safe."

Warren told council that the World Health Organization is only recommending masks be worn in areas of widespread COVID-19 transmission where there's limited or no capacity for other containment measures, such as physical distancing, contact tracing, testing and isolation and care for suspected and confirmed cases.



Graham Paine/Torstar

Mask wearing has been a hotly debated topic across Halton.

"That is not the case in Halton Region," he said. "Rates of infection and transmission in Halton Region are very low, and we do have the capacity to implement other containment measures."

He asserted that there are "significant downsides" for the community at large when it comes to wearing masks.

"The general public does not know how to use PPE appropriately, including masks," he said.

"Masks can increase face touching and increase rates of infection."

Warren added that masks can impair communication, identification, hydration and nutrition, and also give people a false sense of security.

"In the context of very low rates of COVID-19 infection and transmission in Halton Region, and other measures being implemented here, it is questionable what benefit, if any, will be achieved with mandatory

masking," he said.

Warren wasn't alone in his opposition to the bylaw, with four other Halton residents who spoke during the meeting urging councillors to turn the regulation down. One other citizen, aside from Alam, voiced her opinion in favour of universal masks.

The Halton-wide temporary bylaw requires everyone aged five and up to wear a non-medical mask or face covering in enclosed public spaces. It comes into effect on July 22 and will expire on November 30, with the option for regional council to extend this date.

There are several exemptions to the rule, including for people with underlying health conditions that inhibit their ability to wear a mask.

The region-wide regulation will co-exist with the local mask bylaws that have already been passed in Burlington (effective July 20) and Halton Hills (effective July 16).

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