GUIDANCE ON USE OF FACE MASKS IN THE COMMUNITY IN SELF HELP AFRICA PROGRAMMING

COVID-19 RESPONSE

In the current COVID-19 pandemic, what initially started as an imported virus with infected persons travelling from outside regions and countries, it now has become a community spread infection.

It is highly contagious and can be easily spread from one infected person to another, with many people becoming seriously ill and the increased risk of mortality.

Countries have put public health strategies and guidelines in place to try and reduce/stop the spread of this virus. The spread is by respiratory droplets from the lungs. If infected persons cough or sneeze either close to a person or the droplets fall on surfaces, this can lead to infection.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Regular hand washing for 20 seconds with soap.
- When coughing or sneezing, cover mouth and nose with bent elbow or tissue. Put used tissues in closed bin and wash hands thoroughly.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces (door handles, counters etc.). Use regular household disinfectants to clean surfaces.
- Social distancing of one, but ideally two metres.
- Do NOT shake hands or make close contact where possible.

Self Help Africa

For more information visit:
selfhelpafrica.org/ie/covid-19

Use of Face Masks

- There is increasing evidence that persons with mild or no symptoms (asymptomatic), at the early stages of COVID-19 infection can contribute to the spread of the virus. Although evidence is limited, it has been recommended that in certain contexts it is advisable to wear a face mask. The major potential benefit is that an asymptomatic infected person will not unintentionally spread the virus to others. However, the recommendations from WHO are from studies on other influenzas and pandemics rather than specifically on COVID-19 due to the newness of this virus. Some countries have made it mandatory for people in public spaces to wear a face mask or risk being fined or put in jail.

- However, the wearing of masks should only be used when social distancing is not possible in public spaces such as public transport, markets, grocery stores, banks, at water points when collecting water etc. It is also essential that all the other public health measures as stated above are maintained.

Types of Masks:

Surgical or Medical Masks:
- These should be reserved for health care workers and those providing care for COVID-19 patients at home.
- If a person has been confirmed with COVID-19 then the wearing of a medical mask may prevent the spread of the infection.

Non-Medical Face Masks (community masks):
- These are various forms of self-made or commercial masks or face coverings made of cloth, other textiles.
- They are not standardised therefore should not be used by health care workers. They should not be used in the home if someone is caring for a person with COVID-19.

Respirators:
- This is a filtering face-piece used in specific situations by health workers to prevent themselves from inhaling specific airborne contaminants. It does not stop the spread of droplets from the wearer of the mask. It is considered PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and should be reserved for medical settings.

It is important that the general population – (people in the community) wear locally made masks as PPE should be reserved for health workers as currently PPE is in short supply worldwide and health workers are at a much higher risk of becoming infected and then contaminating others in the community.

Who should wear a non-medical face mask in the community:

Non-medical face masks should be worn by everyone out in public spaces (shops, markets etc.) where social distancing is not possible or where governments have made it mandatory to wear face masks when outside the home (public spaces). Babies and young children (under 2 years) and persons with disabilities if unable to remove the mask themselves should not wear face masks.

Considerations when making local Masks:
- Number of layers of fabric – minimum of 2 layers pf high thread count.
- Use material such as cotton so that is reasonably easy to breathe through it.
- Mask shape should be sufficient to completely cover the nose and mouth and can be tucked under the chin.
- Fitting of masks – should be comfortable enough (not too tight or loose) so that when wearing it does not need to be touched or readjusted frequently.

How to put on and take off Mask:
- For all types of masks, the appropriate use and disposal is essential to reduce the risk of contamination and transmission of the virus.
- Check mask is clean, un-damaged and dry before use.
- Wash hands with soap or use alcohol sanitiser before putting on mask.
- Place the mask on face ensuring to fully cover nose and mouth and tie securely or place elastic ear loops to minimise gaps.
- Avoid touching the front of the mask while wearing it, if you do then wash hands with soap or use alcohol-based sanitiser.
- When removing the mask, untie mask from behind or take off by the elastic ear loops. Do not touch the front of the mask
- Change masks when they become damp with a new clean mask.

How to clean or dispose of masks:
- For cloth/reusable masks wash with hot soapy water, dry in the sun or use a hot iron.
- When cloth masks become worn/unusable then dispose in a pit latrine or burn.
- For those that use single-use surgical masks these need to be disposed of in a covered waste bin or bag and when full should be disposed of properly (insinuated).
- Do not litter the ground with used masks.

IMPORTANT: Wearing of face masks must be <u>an extra addition</u> to the other main public health components which include 1) Regular hand washing; 2) Good cough/sneeze etiquette; 3) Clean and disinfect frequently used surfaces; 4) Observe Social distancing.