

Excerpts from the Health Information & Quality Authority (HIQA) Report

Evidence summary for face mask use by healthy people in the community

21 August 2020

‘Conclusion’ (included in its entirety):

‘There is **limited, low certainty evidence** based on four observational studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic that face masks may reduce the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Studies from previous pandemic settings and for other respiratory viruses also provide **low certainty evidence** that the wearing of face masks in community settings reduces the risk of transmission of respiratory pathogens. However, their **applicability to COVID-19 is uncertain** given possible differences between viruses in their pathogenicity, infectivity and potential differences in the relative contribution of the different modes of transmission (droplet, aerosol, contact). Elsewhere, epidemiological, air sampling and microbiological studies have been noted to provide some **low certainty evidence** for possible aerosol transmission of SARS-CoV-2, although its contribution relative to droplet and **contact transmission is uncertain**. **National and international public health guidance on the use of face masks is based on low certainty direct evidence of clinical effectiveness, indirect evidence that supports plausibility of effectiveness**, as well as a consideration that SARS-CoV-2 appears to be more infectious than many other respiratory pathogens studied to date. Chou et al. identified five studies that are ongoing, however, **only one of these is set outside of healthcare settings**.⁽⁸³⁾ **Further research is urgently required, particularly high quality studies that provide direct evidence on the use of face masks by healthy people in the community. The WHO has urged countries that have recommended the wearing of face masks by healthy people in community settings to ‘conduct research on this important topic’.**

‘Potential harms of face masks’

‘Where wearing face masks is recommended, this should be accompanied by a comprehensive strategy to address safe wearing, handling and disposal of face masks to reduce the potential for self-contamination. **While a limited number of potential harms of wearing masks were reported by some studies, mainly related to discomfort, heat, humidity and pain, none of the studies included in this evidence summary specifically commented on safety.**’

Full report available: <https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2020-08/Evidence-summary-face-masks-in-the-community.pdf>