

Mexicans put faith in masks -- but do they work?

April 28 2009, By PAUL HAVEN , Associated Press Writer



A man wearing a face mask holds a statue of Saint Jude, the saint of lost causes, outside the Saint Jude Thaddaeus church in Mexico City, Tuesday, April 28, 2009. Despite the church closed doors and calls from authorities to leave due to the swine flu outbreak, hundreds of faithful arrived to pray and pay their respects to Saint Jude at the entrance of the church.(AP Photo/Dario Lopez-Mills)

(AP) -- The cloth patches in green, blue and white are everywhere, clamped tight over the mouth and nose of teachers, toddlers, policemen and drunks. Even the statue at the church of St. Jude, patron of lost causes, has been fitted with a light-blue surgical mask to ward off swine flu.

But do they work?

While Mexico has handed out millions of facial coverings, U.S. officials have held off, saying there is little evidence of their effectiveness. Some doctors warn they might even be harmful, causing people to take risks - like venturing into crowds or neglecting to wash hands - in the mistaken belief that the mask protects them.

The ubiquitous masks give an eerie, unsettling air to this overcrowded city, as if 20 million people have entered a scene from some kind of apocalyptic future. They're also a reminder of an equally frightening episode: Technicolor versions of those dotting scratchy black and white photographs from the 1918 Spanish [Influenza](#) epidemic, which claimed up to 50 million lives worldwide.

Soldiers hand them out at subway stations. Pharmacies and hardware stores can't keep them in stock. Newspapers have begun running front page instructions on making do-it-yourself mouth coverings. President Felipe Calderon proudly boasted over the weekend that more than 6 million masks have been distributed.

"They must be worn when one is out in public or in a closed, crowded space," Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova insisted Monday, while acknowledging in the same breath that the government-distributed masks are too porous to eliminate all risk.

"They still offer enough protection as a public health measure," he offered.

U.S. health officials give very different guidance. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) said there is not a lot of evidence that masks do much good, and have pointedly not recommended their use by the general public. [Swine flu](#) is thought to be transmitted in much the same way as seasonal flu, by touching something with the virus and then passing it to the nose or mouth or through coughing or sneezing.

Experts say people who come in close contact with known swine flu patients should wear high filtration masks like those used by health professionals, which are more effective but also more expensive (about 12 pesos or a dollar) and generally unavailable in Mexico City. But even these masks, which filter out fine particles carried in the air, must be used properly to give real protection.

"The evidence that masks work is relatively weak," said Peter Sandman, a New Jersey-based consultant in crisis communication. Still, he was loath to criticize the Mexican government, because mask-wearing also can have psychological benefits.

"It's not dumb to give people things to do, even if those things are only slightly effective, because it will make those who are anxious feel calmer, and those who are too nonchalant take the threat more seriously," he said.

In the streets of Mexico's capital, almost everybody was taking the threat seriously.

Drivers wore the masks while alone in their cars. Young couples strolled down the street talking to each other through the gauzy coverings, and parents fitted small masks over the faces of toddlers and infants.

Some wore the masks like talismans wrapped around their necks rather than over their mouth and nose, more as a point of faith than for physical protection. Others took a comical approach, painting Pancho Villa mustaches or wide, toothy smiles on the mask - but still keeping them firmly in place.

Inside the church of San Hipolito, someone fitted a surgical mask over a statue of St. Jude. Whether as a precaution or to highlight the hopelessness of the effort, the gesture was not enough to stop church

officials from canceling a special service held on the 28th of each month to have their statues blessed.

Several hundred people - many carrying statues of the saint - lingered outside the church anyway in the midday heat, undeterred by the warnings blared from a patrol car's loudspeaker: "Disperse! It is dangerous to gather in groups. Disperse!"

Antonio Guzman, a 44-year-old laborer who clutched a blue mask to his face as he pushed through the crowd, said he had come to the church to ask St. Jude for protection against the virus, and for help with work.

"He needs to help us. It isn't fair, all that we have been suffering," said Guzman, wearing a black T-Shirt that read: "FEED THE FEVER."

Remedios Ramirez sold religious trinkets to the faithful, her mask dangling loosely around her neck. Asked why she didn't have it over her mouth, she gestured to a lollypop she was sucking.

"I'll put it back on when I finish," she said. "But I don't have a lot of faith in these masks. It is all in God's hands."

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