

Finland encourages use of face masks in policy turnaround

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Finns should now wear masks when outdoors, the country's public health chief said Tuesday, reversing previous advice that widespread mask usage would not slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Markku Tervahauta, head of Finland's Institute of Health and Welfare (THL), said the [policy change](#) came after recent studies showed that the virus is spread by asymptomatic people more than previously thought.

"I recommend that people wear fabric [masks](#) to protect others from possible infection," Tervahauta told the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat.

The recommendation will not be enacted into law, Tervahauta said, as authorities cannot monitor the quality or availability of fabric masks, which people can make for themselves at home.

People should not try to obtain professional grade protective equipment, he said, in order to ensure sufficient stocks for health workers.

Previously, Finland had adopted WHO recommendations saying that face protection should be used only by people who themselves have the virus or are caring for infected people.

Although fabric masks are not suitable for people with breathing difficulties or children, "the benefits to the population are clearly greater than the drawbacks," Tervahauta said, adding that THL would issue advice on how masks should be worn.

This week Finnish health authorities are due to receive the first results from a programme of antibody testing carried out on random members of the public, which officials hope will indicate how much of the population has been infected.

The face mask recommendation comes days after the head of Finland's preparedness agency stepped down following a debacle in which a multi-million euro consignment of masks ordered from China turned out to be unsuitable for hospital use.

Tomi Lounema, CEO of the National Emergency Supply Agency, initially blamed the "extremely chaotic" Chinese market after quality control checks last Wednesday found that the first batch of two million masks did not meet standards required for use in a medical environment.

However on Friday Lounema resigned after it emerged that the deficient masks were not procured via official channels but through a businessman with a history of bankruptcies and a former reality TV star turned cosmetic surgery entrepreneur.

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