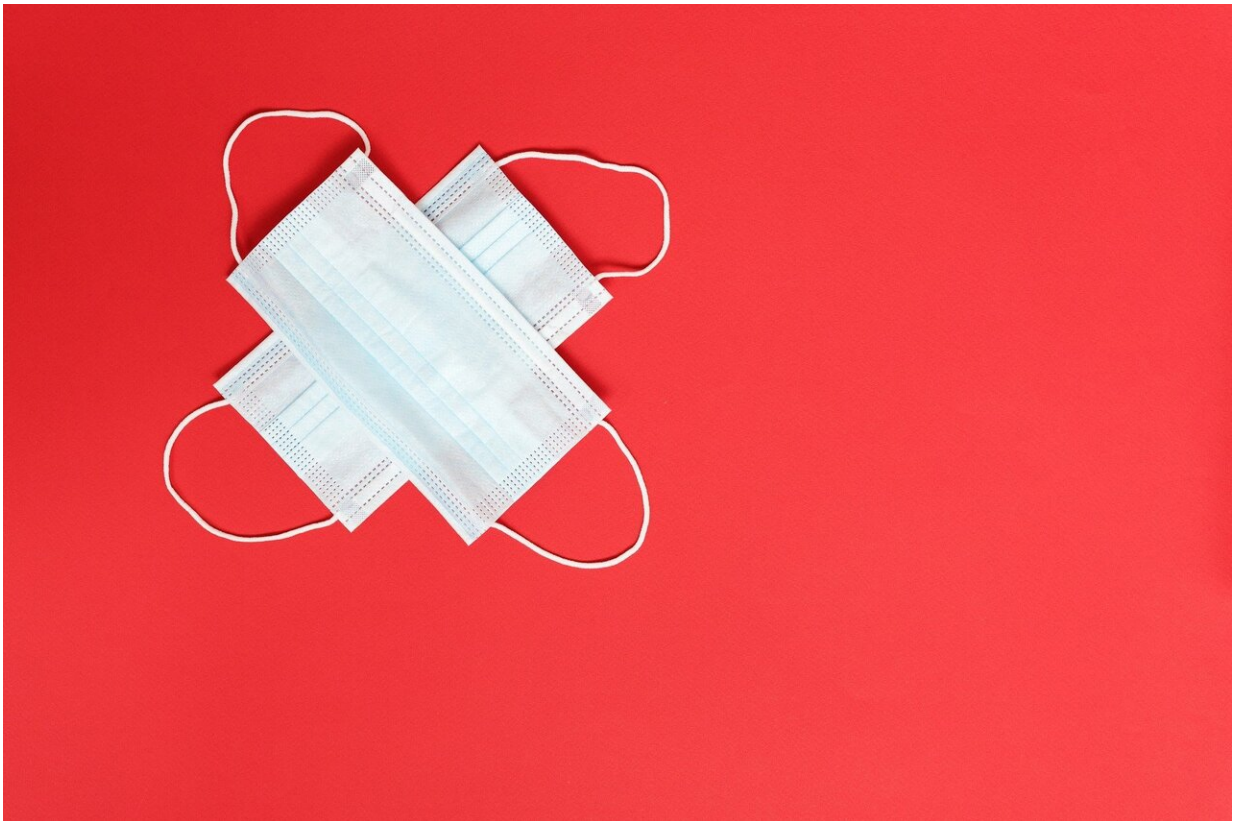


No country for face masks: Nordics brush off mouth covers

July 30 2020



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

As most of the world either orders or recommends the use of face masks, with even US president Donald Trump seen wearing one, Nordic nations are the remaining holdouts.

In supermarkets, on buses, and along the streets of capitals—such as Stockholm, Copenhagen, Oslo, Helsinki and Reykjavik—face masks are a rare sight, worn only by a small minority, many of who are tourists.

According to a recent survey by YouGov, only five to 10 percent of respondents in the Nordic countries said they used a mask in public settings, a figure that has remained stable since the start of the crisis in March.

At the same time, the corresponding figures have risen to between 70 and 80 percent for most of the other 20 countries polled, including India and the United States.

"I have the impression that if the government doesn't say clearly 'we advise you to wear a mask', nobody will," 21-year-old French student Camille Fornaroli told AFP, adding she was shocked to see how rare masks were in Stockholm.

Following recommendations

Birgitta Wedel, a 63-year-old pensioner, told AFP she would have preferred if Sweden's authorities recommended masks, at least on public transport.

But she added that she would keep going without one unless there was a shift in official policy.

"If they don't... I will not wear it because nobody else does," Wedel said.

Marten Sporrong, a 50-year-old businessman, also said he would follow government recommendations: "If they tell us we don't need masks, we won't wear them".

Sweden has received global attention for its softer approach to curbing the spread of the virus which, coupled with a relatively higher death toll, has led to the region's largest country being shunned by its neighbours.

But when it comes to masks, the Nordic nations look staunchly united.

"Except for Sweden, there are very few cases in those countries," KK Cheng, an epidemiologist at the University of Birmingham's Institute of Applied Health Research told AFP.

"So I don't blame them for not doing it, as long as they have reasonable social distancing and contact tracing is done properly," Cheng added.

Asked Tuesday what might change his mind on recommending the use of face masks, Sweden's chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell said he was still waiting for "some form of proof that they are effective".

'Stubborn'

For Cheng, such logic is questionable.

"I think it's wrong, it's irresponsible and it's stubborn," the epidemiologist said.

"If he's wrong, it costs life. If I'm wrong, what harm does it do?"

After the World Health Organization (WHO) changed its guidance, Danish health officials began cautiously recommending using masks in early July—such as when going to the hospital for a test or when you are coming back from a risk area.

"Face covers don't make sense in the current situation, where we have a consistently very low level of infection," Soren Brostrom, director of the

Danish Health Authority, told broadcaster DR on Tuesday.

"But could it make sense in the long-term, when we bump into each other on public transport and other situations? That is of course something that we will evaluate," Brostrom added.

Similarly, in Norway and Finland, although there is "no opposition in principle," masks are deemed an unnecessary precaution while the spread is low.

"It may be something that will have to be considered in the near future if the contamination increases," Are Stuwitz Berg, a doctor with the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, told AFP.

Mika Salminen, director of Health Security at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, told broadcaster YLE the issue would likely resurface "when people begin to return from holidays to a greater extent, and of course if the epidemic situation changes radically."

On Thursday however, one Nordic country broke slightly from the mold.

Iceland—which like its neighbours have so far sworn off masks—announced that it would start requiring their use on public transport, domestic flights, ferries and in hairdressing salons.

© 2020 AFP

Citation: No country for face masks: Nordics brush off mouth covers (2020, July 30) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-country-masks-nordics-mouth.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.