

# Straight talk from front-line experts on wearing a mask

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(HealthDay)—On the front lines of the war against COVID-19, masks

have become a flashpoint.

How well do they protect against the new coronavirus—if at all?

To separate facts from fiction, two experts from Penn State Health weigh in to clear up common misconceptions.

They laid to rest the claim that no studies have investigated the effectiveness of masks.

"Several observational studies published since the COVID-19 pandemic began show emerging data that masks coupled with other distancing measures help to prevent the transmission of COVID-19," infectious disease specialist Dr. Catharine Paules said in a Penn State news release.

They also dashed another myth—that masks won't help you avoid getting sick.

"Masks do help keep you from getting sick but they are even more effective at preventing somebody else from getting sick. They inhibit some of an infected person's droplets from spreading. This is especially important for people who either have no COVID-19 symptoms or have symptoms so mild that they don't realize they are infected," said immunologist Dr. Tracy Fausnight.

"Wearing a mask is a way to say, 'I care about you,' to those around you," she added.

But [masks](#) alone aren't enough, the doctors emphasized. Social distancing and hand hygiene also play crucial roles in preventing the spread of COVID-19.

The doctors also pointed to another myth: Herd immunity is the way to

fight the virus.

Herd immunity works only if about 70% of the population has COVID-19 antibodies from either a past infection or from a vaccine, Paules and Fausnight said. But, they added, it would take a catastrophic number of deaths to get to 70%.

That means it's crucial to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus whenever possible until there are effective treatments or a vaccine.

And, no, the doctors said, wearing a mask won't weaken your immune system. Your system is exposed to germs all the time. Wearing a mask won't prevent it from "remembering" those prior exposures and staying strong.

The physicians conceded, however, that wearing a mask may cause some people anxiety and a sense of claustrophobia. But, they added, that can be overcome.

"Try wearing a mask at home for short periods of time," Paules said. "Then you can gradually build up to wearing it for a whole trip to the grocery store, for example."

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [coronavirus protection](#).

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