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May 18, 2020

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WHATCOM COUNTY HEALTH OFFICER DIRECTS USE OF FACE COVERINGS IN PUBLIC
EFFECTIVE FRIDAY, MAY 22

BELLINGHAM, WA – This week Whatcom County joins King County in issuing a Local Health Officer Directive regarding use of face coverings in public. Whatcom County Health Officer Dr. Greg Stern has issued a directive for those in shared workspaces and public places to wear cloth masks, effective Friday, May 22.

According to Dr. Stern, there are several reasons for the Directive, including maintaining the gains achieved through existing social distancing measures like the statewide stay-at-home order. Limiting virus transmission is especially important as summer approaches and more workplaces and businesses reopen.

“Most of the measures restricting activities and closing businesses worked by keeping people away from each other and from infected surfaces,” said Dr. Stern. “These measures helped us avoid high levels of COVID-19 disease, hospitalizations, and death.”

“However, COVID-19 has not gone away. As we loosen restrictions in order to sustain our economy, we risk losing the progress we have already made in controlling the spread,” said Dr. Stern.

That’s because the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily by respiratory droplets. Given the way it is spread, there are only a few things that can slow it:

- Physical distancing – staying at least six feet away from others;
- Isolating and quarantining people who are sick or were in close contact with people who were sick;
- Washing hands frequently and avoiding touching one’s face;
- Frequently sanitizing surfaces and objects that others touch; and
- When in shared or public spaces, wearing a face covering.

Face coverings are not a substitute to replace the other ways to reduce transmission.

“Wearing a face covering alone isn’t protection against COVID-19 infection,” said Dr. Stern. “People should wear face coverings to help slow the spread of the virus in the community, to protect others. Masks will protect other people from you, and when others cover their faces, they’re doing their part to protect you from them.”

As businesses begin to reopen, under “[Safe Start Washington](#): a phased approach to recovery,” there will be more opportunity for people to gather, increasing the potential for spreading the virus.

“If COVID-19 resumes rapid spread we will have to limit activities and contacts again to control it. Businesses will not be able to recover if workers and customers are ill or at risk of becoming ill. We don’t



have a choice between disease control and economic or social activity. We have to sustain both or we will have neither.”

About the Directive

Public spaces in which masks should be worn include stores that sell food and beverages; retail stores; restaurant take-out and food businesses; public transportation; and manufacturing, agriculture, and construction workplaces. The Directive also applies in outdoor settings such as parks or trails where 6 feet of distance cannot be maintained between non-household members.

The Directive does not apply to certain groups of people: children under 2; children under 12 who aren't supervised by a parent or caregiver; people with physical disabilities that make wearing or removing a face covering difficult; people who are deaf and use facial and mouth movements to communicate; people who have been advised by a medical professional to not wear a face covering; and people who have trouble breathing, or are unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the covering without assistance.

The Directive to wear face coverings does not create grounds for residents or law enforcement to stop, detain, issue a citation, arrest, intimidate, or harass individuals who do not comply with it. The Directive should be used to educate and encourage people to wear face coverings.

Providing Masks

Whatcom Unified Command will purchase and distribute masks for free to vulnerable communities and those who face barriers to obtaining masks, including people experiencing homelessness, older adults, and low-income residents. Reusable face coverings will be made available through community organizations.

A supply of 100,000 single-use, non-medical masks will also be purchased and distributed to locally-owned businesses and local governments as they reopen. The masks are intended to be used by employees and customers and will be distributed through local Chambers of Commerce.

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