APPARENT HORIZON

MORE TIPS FOR MASKHOLES

Always keep masks on in public… even when you think no one else is around

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With the SARS-COV-2 coronavirus raging out of control across the US, in part because of the widespread refusal to wear masks, far too many Massholes have joined the ranks of antisocial maskholes in recent weeks. Even here in Cambridge—which still has a citywide mask order in place—we've gone from 80-90% compliance based on my casual observations to maybe 60-70% compliance over the last several weeks since summer began. And all the reports I get from friends, family, and colleagues around the Commonwealth indicate that almost no one wears masks outside of the immediate Boston area when not inside stores and businesses. Even as the numbers of coronavirus infections and deaths are starting to creep up again hereabouts. While we're still not testing enough people anywhere in the US to really keep proper track of where outbreaks are happening and bring them under control.

So I encourage Bay Staters to think this situation through with me. We are facing a virus that still hasn't infected most people in the US—and hasn't infected an even larger percentage in Massachusetts since the Baker administration has been better about listening to medical experts than most other governors (and far better than the "president"). Asking people to stay home for longer than Americans elsewhere did, stressing the importance of wearing masks, and frequently being seen wearing one in public himself.

But we won't achieve the herd immunity that will stop the pandemic until at least 60% of the population has been infected with the coronavirus and recovered or, ideally, has taken an effective vaccine against that virus. Meaning that it's still very much in circulation and a very serious public health threat.

Scientists still haven't found effective treatments for the disease the virus causes, COVID-19—though they have a few good candidates and are probably close to success on that front. A vaccine capable of ending the pandemic is further away, but Stage 3 trials have begun on some candidate vaccines and there is a reasonable possibility that one or more could be ready for mass distribution as early as the end of this year. Understanding that it could ultimately take a year or more before everyone who is willing to get vaccinated can do so. And that's the most optimistic scenario. Some knowledgeable observers say it may take years before we have a good vaccine.

The coronavirus, meanwhile, has mutated to become even more contagious than it was before. All the more reason for Mass residents—and tourists from more stupid locales—to adhere to the following updated health tips in the public interest. That's right… public interest. Not just your individual interest. Because every one of you who refuses to follow guidelines that have now been proven to work is basically flipping off everyone who sees your uncovered face.

Including the people unlucky enough to live with you. Who you are putting at increased risk of infection every day you go out unmasked.

1) Wear a mask or similar face covering over your mouth and nose at all times when leaving your home.
No excuses. You don't do this simple thing that protects other people from the possibly infected droplets you breathe out, then you are not a good person. It also offers some protection to you, too. So you don't have to be a saint to do the right thing.

2) Do not take off your mask when walking around outdoors.
Even when you think no one else is around. Because it's now well documented that the coronavirus remains airborne and infectious for up to three hours in enclosed spaces after people walk by without wearing a mask. If they are infected with the virus—and up to half of infected people show no symptoms at all through much of the course of their illness—every time they breathe they leave behind a cloud of droplets that hangs around. Outdoors where there is a larger volume of air plus wind (and sun, during the day), the virus hangs around for less time. But that doesn't mean it's not a risk. And that risk dramatically increases when people without masks are talking, singing, sweating, coughing, or sneezing while they walk. When someone else walks through the path of someone without a mask outside—just after they have passed by or even minutes later—there is a nonzero risk that they can inhale droplets infected with coronavirus. So this nonsense thing that clueless people do where they keep their masks around their necks and only put them on when they are close to someone else has to stop. When other people walk where those simpletons just were they can get infected even if they are wearing a typical mask or face covering. As those don't protect them from inhaling infectious droplets since most masks aren't sealed on all sides and aren't capable of stopping tiny droplets from getting through to wearers' mouths and noses in any case. Only properly fitted N95 (or better) masks and respirators can do that consistently. And only medical and other frontline personnel have access to those better options now. Since the US has failed to produce enough personal protective equipment for the population. Unlike better-run less sociopathic nations.

3) Avoid entering any indoor public spaces unless absolutely necessary and always wear a mask when you do.
Obviously if you have to shop for food or other necessities, you've got to do what you've got to do. But think of other people and wear your best mask or face covering while doing it. And just because the Baker administration has fallen down on the job by allowing many businesses and government offices to open before we've really defeated the first wave of the pandemic in the Commonwealth doesn't mean you should go into any indoor public space you don't absolutely need to be in.

4) If you have to eat at a sit-down restaurant, do it outdoors. The larger volume of air plus wind/sun outside will really help lower the risk.
Just to be clear, I don't think anyone should be eating at sit-down restaurants yet since people have to take their masks off to eat and drink. But if you're going to do it, don't eat indoors. And don't frequent restaurants like the ones in the North End whose owners have flouted city and state reopening rules—putting outdoor tables too close together and allowing their staff to keep masks off while serving customers, according to Eater Boston. Also try to check the kitchens and other food prep areas to make sure back-of-house staff like cooks are wearing masks while making your food. And do not use indoor bathrooms outside your home except in the most dire emergency. Every time the toilet flushes, a fountain of droplets spews forth, which can be infected with coronavirus for what should be obvious reasons. And hangs in the air for up to three hours in the confined space of the bathroom. In addition to droplets people breathe out while using the facilities. Super unsafe, suffice to say.

5) Avoid crowded and close-contact settings.
The more people around you, the less safe you are. Whether everyone is wearing masks or not. And since there is virtually nowhere where everyone is wearing masks, you are always at higher risk for getting infected with coronavirus when more people are near you. So all you geniuses filling beaches and parks and not wearing masks might want to rethink such practices.

6) Your friends and extended family are not any safer than anyone else.
Far, far too many people are hanging out with friends and family they don't live with and utterly failing to observe social distancing protocols and wear masks when doing so. This is absolutely a dangerous practice and must stop. Just because you're connected to people by bonds of amity and kinship doesn't mean you can't infect each other with the highly contagious coronavirus. If you don't believe that this is a real threat, just check out the national news pretty much any day of the week and you'll see a case where a bunch of people in an extended family or friendship network got sick from this kind of gathering. And some of them inevitably died.

7) Kids are not immune to coronavirus. Don't send them back to school.
Any K-12 school system that is thinking about reopening in the fall because kids are less likely to die from COVID-19 (and because they don't care about the health of their teachers and staff) is being completely irresponsible. Any parent planning to send their kids back to school is wrong. And suicidal. Because kids are far more likely to get infected in their classrooms than they are in most other settings—even if they wear masks. They will then bring that infection right back home to their parents, who are at far higher risk of getting very sick or dying the older they are and the more comorbidities they have. Colleges are no safer, by the way, and shouldn't be reopening either.

8) All previous mask tips that I and other commentators have stated still apply.
Wear your mask or face covering properly. Don't leave your nose uncovered, because that's the same as not wearing one at all. And don't take it off in public ever if you can avoid it. Because, in addition to the other points that have been oft-made, touching the front of your mask to push it up and down is unsafe and can result in you getting coronavirus in your mouth and nose from direct contact. The only safe way to put a mask on or take it off is by the straps (or the back corners of a bandana if you're using that type of face covering).

That's it for now. Stay safe… and help others stay safe. Don't be a maskhole.