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Why I'm not selfish for refusing to wear a mask

Mixed messaging over face masks and their effectiveness is causing all kinds of problems – and we cannot live in a two-tier world

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Last week I was in Waitrose, doing my food shopping. Bare-faced and mask-free, I spied an old friend. As I wheeled my trolley over to her, smiling, our eyes met for a millisecond, before she looked off in the other direction and scurried off, disappearing – pink mask and all – into the frozen food aisle.

I'm finding uncomfortable incidents like this are becoming increasingly common, ever since masks were made voluntary back in the summer. What could have been a freedom day of sorts rapidly turned into a moral maze; with "to mask or not to mask" becoming one of the most divisive of all pandemic restrictions. A new survey shows that some older people even say they are restricting social mixing because of a "selfish" lack of face coverings, with many pensioners backing the return of mandatory masks.

Why are they blaming me for how they feel? I for one punched the air when I could finally tear off my mask. I find them insufferable; the way they fog up your glasses, turn into soggy germ-infested mulch within minutes, and make you feel trapped in a claustrophobic hell.

Even the experts cannot agree on how effective they are. One study (a meta analysis of other studies, published in the British Medical Journal) found that non-pharmaceutical measures, such as mask-wearing, handwashing and social distancing, can reduce Covid infections. By pooling the findings from the six studies which looked specifically at mask-wearing, researchers concluded that wearing a mask can cut Covid incidence by 53 per cent.

Yet a growing number of scientists are beginning to question the efficacy of mask-wearing. Think tank The Cato Institute has published a critical review of the evidence for face masks to prevent the spread of Covid. Its analysis of mask-wearing studies concluded that "examination of the efficacy of masks has produced a large volume of mostly low- to moderate-quality evidence that has largely failed to demonstrate their value in most settings".

I am not an anti-masker. Like most people, I happily complied when it was mandatory. I caught Covid badly last year and so was extra vigilant; scrubbing my hands until they were raw and Dettol-gunning my entire flat. We were all terrified of the enemy lurking in every breath or brush-past.

More than a year on, as we slide into the next phase, quite frankly I feel almost invincible. I am double-vaxxed, have just had my booster jab, and may even have some natural immunity remaining from when I had Covid. Pfizer's own data suggests that the booster shot restores its vaccination's efficacy to 95 per cent, while the latest stats show that about 80 per cent of over-70s who had initial doses of vaccine have now had their booster, which is also heartening.

The tut-tutters and trolley dashers forget that mask-wearing was only ever supposed to be a temporary measure and certainly not part of our post-vaxxed world.

Of course, I'm aware that there is a slight chance that even with a booster you can carry the virus and infect others, I have to ask whether mask-wearing is the way forward. What nobody seems to mention is that proper surgical masks cost a fortune and should be changed regularly – they're making some individuals a lot of money while creating a lot of excess waste. Yet they seem to have become the most powerful symbol of our pandemic society, and, looking around, one that many people seem hesitant to give up.

In this two-tier world, even at my local social club some members make a great show of wearing their face covering as they walk through the myriad rooms to the outside terrace. This virtue signalling marks them out as upholders of the status quo. Never mind that their mouth is covered, every inch of their fabric mask screeches: "We care!"

When one arts producer acquaintance wagged his finger at me, and told me in muffled tones that wearing a mask made other people feel safe, I thanked him for his advice but added that I was not persuaded.

The confusion is not helped by the muddle even our politicians find themselves in. Boris Johnson and many in the Tory Party caused widespread criticism for conducting business maskless. The Labour Party was quick to react and made a big point of showing off its social concern by masking up at PMQs, but not as many masks were in evidence at its party conference.

With all this mixed messaging, maybe we should take a leaf out of the European approach so we all know where we stand. Over there, it seems to be clearer cut. In Spain and Portugal, it is still mandatory to wear masks in many public settings, whereas Denmark lifted its requirement to wear masks on public transport back in August. What a breath of fresh air.

At some point, we are going to have to move on to the next phase of living. Nadhim Zahawi, the former vaccines minister, has declared that Britain may move from pandemic to endemic

status (meaning the risk is always there but usually limited to particular regions and therefore easier to manage).

“We will probably, I hope, without being complacent, be the first major economy in the world to demonstrate how you transition [from] pandemic to endemic using vaccines,” he said.

So I am refusing to wear a mask even at the doctor’s, though at my last appointment an irate receptionist tried to push one into my hand.

I disagree with the notion that not wearing a mask is disrespectful. I would argue that the continued mask wearing simply plays into the fear factor and keeps us locked into a perpetual panic mode. One which I refuse to be kept in.