



# HOUSE OF COMMONS

16 July 2020



John Penrose MP

Dear [REDACTED]

Many thanks for getting in touch about the need for facemasks, and I should probably start by saying that you are right about the issue being widely debated (mainly over whether they should be required or merely recommended when we all go shopping!) at the moment.

At the moment, the scientific advice says that if an infected person wears a mask it can reduce the amount of virus-loaded aerosol when they breath or cough (depending on the type of mask), which will help prevent the infection from spreading. And anyone working in close proximity to someone who is known to be infected (for example carers or hospital staff on covid wards) will need special airtight-fit masks too. But for the rest of us who are healthy and uninfected, the benefits are a great deal weaker; the main advantage of masks is that they stop people touching their faces as much which, if they aren't washing their hands enough, helps protect them if they have touched a surface where the aerosol has come to rest.

So, until now, the conclusion has been that masks aren't sensible for people in lower-risk situations like shops, because social distancing would solve the problem just as effectively and with less fuss. Plus there are quite a few people who object to being told what to wear, so getting them to comply with something which wasn't going to have a huge effect on public health without criminalising a big group of otherwise-law-abiding people would be problematic. I think the arguments are still finely balanced but, from what I can see, two things have changed recently: the first is that it is becoming clear that there are many more people who are infected (and infectious) without showing any symptoms, so asking healthy-seeming people to wear masks could reduce the r-rate more than anyone realised before. And the second is that there are some people who are still to scared to come out and restart normal life, and if they are reassured by people wearing masks then it may be what we need to kickstart the economy back into life as well.

Ultimately, the science is still developing in this area, so our understanding is improving all the time. And it's also true that the risks are cumulative, so each time we relax more of the lockdown it increases the possible ways for infection to spread. As a result, a measure (like wearing facemasks) which wasn't worthwhile earlier in the relaxation may make more sense later. Either way, none of us wants another lockdown!

Yours sincerely,

*John Penrose*

John Penrose

*MP for Weston-super-Mare*