

- Medical awareness / Hygiene

Improper use of face masks may cause skin infections

Buildup of bacteria leads to irritation, rashes: Expert

The Sun (Malaysia) · 19 Apr 2021 · 4 · 0 BY ALISHA NUR MOHD NOOR newsdesk@thesundaily.com

PETALING JAYA: Face masks may be the best way to protect oneself from Covid-19 infection, but improper use can lead to other ailments.

According to health experts, dirty masks can end up as a favourite breeding ground for bacteria or they can cause irritation to the skin.

Epidemiologist Dr Malina Osman, an associate professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said wearing the same mask multiple times contaminates it with various organisms.

“This can lead to infections or skin diseases,” she told theSun.

She was commenting on an experiment which showed that bacteria, yeast and mould were found in greater quantities when the mask had been worn for longer periods.

The experiment by Eurofins Scientific, an international group of laboratories headquartered in Luxembourg, involved disposable and reusable masks that had been worn for six to 12 hours, for the purpose of comparison.

These masks were then tested for total bacterial count – yeast and mould, as well as *Staphylococcus aureus*, which is commonly linked to skin infections, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, which is linked to rashes, according to a recent report in the Straits Times of Singapore.

Malina said that reusable masks should be washed daily while disposable ones should be used for only six to eight hours.

“Eventually, all masks, including reusable ones, should be replaced to ensure one’s safety.”

She said that a contaminated mask could cause infections like skin diseases as it may contain some other organisms if worn multiple times. However, that would not be an issue if hygiene is well maintained.

At the end of the day, it boils down to a person’s hygiene,” she added.

“Disposable masks that are wet or touched by contaminated hands should be changed immediately, while disposable masks that are not should be replaced after being worn a few times.”

Siti Aqilah Abdul Khair, who is studying for a PhD in Molecular Biology at Nara Institute of Science and Technology in Japan, said a person should have multiple washable masks as they should be washed after each wear.

But once the washable mask becomes damp, it is preferable to change to a new one as a damp mask is not only ineffective, it is also a breeding ground for germs.

“If you don’t change your masks frequently, you may end up inhaling the bacteria or viruses trapped in the mask, which can lead to infections,” she said.

“For people with sensitive skin, moist air in the mask provides a favourable place for acne-causing bacteria to grow. If used and sanitised properly, washable masks can be as good as disposable ones,” she said.

“For people who are not in the frontline in the Covid-19 war, it is just a matter of preference. Either mask works almost equally well at preventing infection if you are not in a high-risk environment. If you prefer sustainable and eco-friendly masks, go for those that are reusable.”

Washable masks are also more cost-effective compared with disposable ones. If they are washed with soap and water after each use, and dried properly, there is no cause for concern.

“With everyone’s busy schedule, these precautions may be overlooked, and we may only realise it when it’s too late.

“I would hate to have mask acne this Raya,” she quipped.