



By email

request-739057-a5532753@whatdotheyknow.com

Our ref: 22/03/ld/3096

16 April 2021

Dear Jane Westover,

Re: 3096 – FOI Evidence for continued wearing of masks and social distancing

Thank you for your request received on 22 March 2021 addressed to Public Health England (PHE). In accordance with Section 1(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (the Act), I can confirm that PHE partly holds the information you have specified. I have answered your questions in turn.

Request

Having read that Dr Mary Ramsey, head of immunization at PHE, is saying wearing masks and social distancing may have to continue for the foreseeable future I would appreciate you sharing evidence that

1) MASKS are beneficial in stopping the spread of the virus. There is much research to be found online that states they have little or no benefit.

PHE can confirm it holds the information you have specified.

PHE has carried out an updated rapid evidence review on the effectiveness of face coverings in the community and COVID-19, in which PHE searched for evidence published between 5 June and 22 September 2020. There were 31 new studies (8 preprints) identified, examining the effectiveness of face coverings in community (non-healthcare) settings and the efficacy of different types of face coverings.

17 observational studies, mainly ecological, consistently reported that the use of face coverings in the community reduced the spread of COVID-19. Face covering interventions were typically implemented alongside other interventions or behaviours designed to limit the spread of COVID-19, and whilst some studies controlled for this in their analyses, the extent of the effectiveness of face coverings in isolation is more difficult to determine. It is also not possible to determine the extent to which the protective effect may be due to source control, wearer protection, and/or a combination of both. Evidence from 14 laboratory simulation studies suggests that various types of face coverings can filter droplets and aerosols to some extent, suggesting that coverings of various materials are more effective than no covering, and multi-layered coverings are more effective than single-layer. Medical masks may

offer better protection than fabric alternatives, provided they fit well. However, none of these simulations used SARS-CoV-2 in their experiments.

The rapid review is exempt under Section 21 of the Act because it is reasonably accessible by other means, and the terms of the exemption mean that we do not have to consider whether or not it would be in the public interest for you to have the information. However, for your convenience I have provided the following link:

<https://phe.koha-ptfs.co.uk/cgi-bin/koha/opac-retrieve-file.pl?id=d86880bf65bd6b18eae21aa3bdaf2a4b>

Under Section 16 of the FOI Act, public authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance. You may find the following paper, which contains information about the application of face coverings in mitigating the B117 variant, to be of interest:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emg-application-of-physical-distancing-and-fabric-face-coverings-in-mitigating-the-b117-variant-sars-cov-2-virus-in-public-workplace-and-community>

2) SOCIAL DISTANCING - is beneficial in stopping the spread of the virus

PHE can confirm it does not hold the information you have specified.

Under Section 16 of the FOI Act, public authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance. Accordingly, you may wish to contact Cabinet Office for further information on social distancing. The contact details can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office>

If you have any queries regarding the information that has been supplied to you, please refer your query to me in writing in the first instance. If you remain dissatisfied and would like to request an internal review, then please contact us at the address above or by emailing foi@phe.gov.uk.

Please note that you have the right to an independent review by the Information Commissioner's Office if a complaint cannot be resolved through the PHE complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner's Office can be contacted by calling the ICO's helpline on 0303 123 1113, visiting the ICO's website at www.ico.org.uk or writing to the ICO at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely
FOI Team