

Q&A with the COVID experts: Are masks safe for children?

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The Union Leader is recruiting experts to answer important questions about the coronavirus pandemic.

This occasional feature will present facts from people in the field to help readers recognize social media misinformation and get the latest news on vaccine mandates and other pandemic protocols.

Q: Are masks safe for children?

Dr. Brian O'Sullivan, pediatric pulmonologist at Children's Hospital at Dartmouth-Hitchcock, responds:

Yes. Masking — especially while indoors — is one of the ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to children until a vaccine is widely available to them, hopefully later this autumn.

As most children are currently ineligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, they are one of our most vulnerable populations. The masking recommendations of the CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics during the COVID-19 pandemic are based on many years of experience in the health care setting using masks to prevent the spread of other highly contagious diseases.

Masks block the water droplets in our breath that carry viruses. Proof of the effectiveness of mask wearing was the amazing decline in cases of influenza ("flu") that we saw last winter. The delta variant of COVID-19 is even more contagious and more serious than influenza and we must do what we can to protect all residents, particularly vulnerable children.

Many scientific studies have shown that standard surgical masks and cloth masks do not cause low oxygen levels or increase carbon dioxide in children. Children can still run and play while wearing masks without fear of causing harm.

A mask can get dirty with extended use and it is recommended that they be washed and/or changed periodically. A dry, clean mask is more effective than a wet, dirty one but children will not be contaminated by their own or other germs if wearing the same mask for much of the day.

There is no doubt our children will be safer if wearing masks indoors at school.

More than masking, however, the most important way that we as adults can protect our children from COVID-19 is to be vaccinated against COVID-19 ourselves, as the children at greatest risk of getting COVID-19 are those who live with unvaccinated family members or guardians.