

But as the authors have stated, there was no no-mask control group. To quote the authors "The finding of a much higher rate of infection in the cloth mask arm could be interpreted as harm caused by cloth masks, efficacy of medical masks, or most likely a combination of both." But why not draw the conclusion that the cloth masks are simply less effective at reducing infection.

For example, some studies indicate medical masks are highly effective – assume an 80% reduction of infection, for both N95 and surgical masks. If, say, out of 100 infections that would have occurred, medical masks prevented 80, resulting in 20 infections, and according to this study, cloth masks would result in 51% more (RR=1.51), i.e. 30 cases, or at upper limit of 95%CI, RR=2.49 i.e. 50 cases, then the cloth masks have still avoided between 50 and 70 cases, i.e. more than half...

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Conflict of Interest:

None declared.

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## COVID-19, shortages of masks and the use of cloth masks as a last resort

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Critical shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) have resulted in the US Centers for Disease Control downgrading their recommendations for health workers treating COVID-19 patients from respirators to surgical masks and finally to home-made cloth masks. As authors of the only published randomised controlled clinical trial of cloth masks, we have been getting daily emails about this from health workers concerned about using cloth masks. The study found that cloth mask wearers had higher rates of infection than even the standard practice control group of health workers, and the filtration provided by cloth masks was poor compared to surgical masks. At the time of the study, there had been very little work done in this space, and so little thought into how to improve the protective value of the cloth masks. Until now, most guidelines on PPE did not even mention cloth masks, despite many health workers in Asia using them.

Health workers are asking us if they should wear no mask at all if cloth masks are the only option. Our research does not condone health workers working unprotected. We recommend that health workers should not work during the COVID-19 pandemic without respiratory protection as a matter of work health and safety. In addition, if health workers get infected, high rates of staff absenteeism from illness may also affect health system capacity to respond. Some health workers may still choose to work in inadequate PPE. In this case, the physic...

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Conflict of Interest:

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