

# New Law to Force Masks While Swimming

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Spain's Ministry of Health announced a new law that would make masks mandatory in all public spaces, even if no one else is around — including when sunbathing at the beach or swimming in the ocean
- › While face masks were already mandatory in public and outdoor spaces when keeping a distance of 1.5 meters (3.2 feet) or more wasn't possible, the updated rule suggests that mask usage is mandated at all times, even when "socially distanced"
- › A number of regional governments immediately suggested that they would defy the initial orders, while the tourism industry also criticized the move
- › Just days after releasing the new rules, the Spanish health ministry proposed revisions that would allow people to forgo a mask at the beach if they are swimming, playing a sport or resting in a fixed spot, and maintaining a distance of 1.5 meters from other people
- › The public narrative is building prejudice against people who refuse to wear masks, such that some are now fearful of people who aren't masked

Widespread mask usage has been virtually useless during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> but mandates were rolled out in countries worldwide nonetheless. Many of the mandates included a caveat that you must wear a mask unless you can maintain a 6-foot distance, or social distancing, from others. This meant that if you were outdoors, you could forgo wearing a mask in most cases and still be in compliance with mandates.

March 30, 2021, however, Spain's Ministry of Health announced a new law, published in the Official State Gazette (BOE),<sup>2</sup> that would remove the social distancing component, making masks mandatory in all public spaces, even if no one else is around – including when sunbathing at the beach or swimming in the ocean.<sup>3</sup>

While face masks were already mandatory in public and outdoor spaces when keeping a distance of 1.5 meters (3.2 feet) or more wasn't possible, the updated rule suggests that mask usage is mandated at all times:<sup>4</sup>

*“People from the age of six and older have the obligation to wear masks [...] on public streets, in outdoor spaces and in any closed space that has a public use or is open to the public.”*

The law also leaves no room for regional governments to make exceptions to the rules, such as at the beach. Previously, certain regions made exceptions to mask mandates at the beach or swimming pools.<sup>5</sup>

## **Backlash Ensues From Tourism Industry**

With the tourism industry already reeling from the pandemic, the restrictive mask mandate would only worsen problems in Spain while offering only an illusion of “safety.” EL PAÍS, a daily newspaper in Spain, reported that the mask mandate change went largely unnoticed until they flagged it, reporting:<sup>6</sup>

*“The obligation to keep mouths and noses covered in public spaces, including the beach and swimming pool, will undoubtedly put a number of tourists off coming to Spain, according to industry pundits who point out that businesses were not consulted on the measure.*

*‘We are going through the kind of hell that threatens to wipe out thousands and thousands of jobs and businesses,’ says José Luis Zoreda, vice-president of Exceltur, the main lobby group for Spanish tourism – a sector which accounted for 12% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) prior to the health crisis. ‘And now they want to turn the beaches into open-air field hospitals.’”*

Wearing a mask in an outdoor area, even when others are far away, defies common sense and reason. Likewise, wearing a mask while swimming – assuming you were able to keep it on, which isn't likely – could pose a drowning risk, not to mention, would the mask even work if it were soaking wet?

Even the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warns, “Do not wear a mask when doing activities that may get your mask wet, like swimming at the beach or pool. A **wet mask** can make it difficult to breathe and may not work as well when wet.”<sup>7</sup>

## **Spain Backtracks on Beach Mask Mandate**

Just days after releasing the new rules that would require masks to be worn at the beach, the Spanish Ministry of Health proposed revisions that would allow people to forgo a mask at the beach if they are swimming, playing a sport or resting in a fixed spot, and maintaining a distance of 1.5 meters from other people.<sup>8</sup>

A number of regional governments had already suggested that they would defy the initial orders, including the Balearic Islands, which stated masks would not be mandatory at area beaches and swimming pools. According to EL PAÍS:<sup>9</sup>

*“... [I]n Andalusia the tension was palpable. Juan Marín, the deputy premier of the southern region, said he did not understand ‘this type of decisions that get made without consulting with the regions.’ And sources in the governments of Catalonia and the Canary Islands said that their legal services are already analyzing the law to determine their next steps.”*

Yet, the back-and-forth passage of arbitrary health rules as policy is becoming so common that it's hard to know what's “allowed” from one day to the next. So, wearing a mask while walking along the shoreline of a beach in Spain is necessary for public health, but if you're playing a sport it's not?

The CDC is similarly confusing, with a recent change allowing physical distancing in classrooms to go from 6 feet to 3 feet.<sup>10</sup> If SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19,

is spread via aerosolized droplets, which research suggests,<sup>11</sup> such droplets remain in the air for at least three hours and can travel over long distances of up to 27 feet.<sup>12</sup>

This further adds to the likelihood that **cloth masks do little** to stop you from getting COVID-19. The Association of American Physicians and Surgeons explained:<sup>13</sup>

*“The preponderance of scientific evidence supports that aerosols play a critical role in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2. Years of dose response studies indicate that if anything gets through, you will become infected. Thus, any respiratory protection respirator or mask must provide a high level of filtration and fit to be highly effective in preventing the transmission of SARS-CoV-2.”*

## **Masks at the Beach Are a Pollution Nightmare**

**Masks are a ticking time bomb** when it comes to pollution, and wearing them at the beach provides direct access to the ocean. It's estimated that 129 billion face masks are used worldwide each month, which works out to about 3 million masks a minute. Most of these are the disposable variety, made from plastic microfibers.<sup>14</sup>

Ranging in size from 5 millimeters (mm) to microscopic lengths, microplastics, which include microfibers, are being ingested by fish, plankton and other marine life, as well as the creatures on land that consume them (including humans<sup>15</sup>).

Mask pollution may end up being even worse than that from plastic bottles because while about 25% of plastic bottles are recycled, “there is no official guidance on mask recycle, making it more likely to be disposed of as solid waste,” researchers from the University of Southern Denmark and Princeton University stated. “With increasing reports on inappropriate disposal of masks, it is urgent to recognize this potential environmental threat ...”<sup>16</sup>

When the masks become weathered in the environment, they can generate a large number of microsized polypropylene particles in a matter of weeks, then break down further into nanoplastics that are less than 1 mm in size.

Because masks may be directly made from micro-sized plastic fibers with a thickness of 1 mm to 10 mm, they may release micro-sized particles into the environment more readily – and faster – than larger plastic items, like plastic bags. Most disposable face masks contain three layers – a polyester outer layer, a polypropylene or polystyrene middle layer and an inner layer made of absorbent material such as cotton.

In the environment, sunlight and heat are not enough to degrade the polypropylene, which is left to persist and accumulate in the environment.<sup>17</sup>

## Multiple Studies Show Masks Are Ineffective

Spain's choice to make their mask mandate even more restrictive is especially puzzling given the evidence that **masks are ineffective**. Only one randomized controlled trial has been conducted on **mask usage and COVID-19 transmission**, and it found masks did not statistically significantly reduce the incidence of infection.<sup>18</sup>

You may also remember that in the early days of the pandemic, face masks were not recommended for the general public. In February 2020, Christine Francis, a consultant for infection prevention and control at WHO headquarters, was featured in a video, holding up a disposable face mask.

She said, "Medical masks like this one cannot protect against the new coronavirus when used alone ... WHO only recommends the use of masks in specific cases."<sup>19</sup> As of March 31, 2020, WHO was still advising against the use of face masks for people without symptoms, stating that there is "no evidence" that such mask usage prevents COVID-19 transmission.<sup>20</sup>

But by June 2020, the rhetoric had changed. Citing "evolving evidence," WHO reversed their recommendation and began advising governments to encourage the general public to wear masks where there is widespread transmission and physical distancing is difficult.<sup>21</sup> Yet that same day, June 5, 2020, WHO published an announcement stating:<sup>22</sup>

*"At present, there is no direct evidence (from studies on COVID-19 and in healthy people in the community) on the effectiveness of universal masking of*

*healthy people in the community to prevent infection with respiratory viruses, including COVID-19.”*

Dr. Jim Meehan, an ophthalmologist and preventive medicine specialist also compiled a number of studies showing the use of masks is highly questionable:<sup>23</sup>

- A working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research<sup>24</sup> found that nonpharmaceutical interventions, such as **lockdowns**, quarantines and **mask mandates**, have not significantly affected overall virus transmission rates.<sup>25</sup>
- A CDC meta-analysis found that face masks did little to reduce virus transmission in the case of influenza, stating, “Although mechanistic studies support the potential effect of hand hygiene or face masks, evidence from 14 randomized controlled trials of these measures did not support a substantial effect on transmission of laboratory-confirmed influenza.”<sup>26</sup>
- A rapid systematic review of 31 studies concluded, “The evidence is not sufficiently strong to support widespread use of facemasks as a protective measure against COVID-19,” adding that there was evidence for their use only for “particularly vulnerable individuals when in transient higher risk situations.”<sup>27</sup>
- In a perspective article published in the New England Journal of Medicine, researchers state, “We know that wearing a mask outside health care facilities offers little, if any, protection from infection,” and go on to describe masks as playing a “symbolic role” as “talismans” to increase the perception of safety, even though “such reactions may not be strictly logical.”

“Expanded masking protocols’ greatest contribution may be to reduce the transmission of anxiety, over and above whatever role they may play in reducing transmission of Covid-19,” they add.<sup>28</sup>

- A commentary published by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy further added, “We do not recommend requiring the general public who do not have symptoms of COVID-19-like illness to routinely wear

cloth or surgical masks because there is no scientific evidence they are effective in reducing the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission ...”<sup>29</sup>

## Is Wearing a Mask ‘Better Than Nothing’?

There’s a myth that wearing a mask makes sense if there’s even a chance that it can protect you from getting sick from COVID-19 – a disease with an average survival rate of 99.74%.<sup>30</sup> This is because mask wearing itself can be harmful with longer term ramifications that are only beginning to be understood.

Germany’s first registry recording the experience children are having wearing masks<sup>31</sup> used data on 25,930 children, revealing 24 physical, psychological and behavioral health issues that were associated with wearing masks.<sup>32</sup> They recorded symptoms that:<sup>33</sup>

*“... included irritability (60%), headache (53%), difficulty concentrating (50%), less happiness (49%), reluctance to go to school/kindergarten (44%), malaise (42%), impaired learning (38%) and drowsiness or fatigue (37%).”*

They also found 29.7% reported feeling short of breath, 26.4% being dizzy and 17.9% were unwilling to move or play.<sup>34</sup> Hundreds more experienced “accelerated respiration, tightness in chest, weakness and short-term impairment of consciousness.”

Another potential issue that’s rarely talked about is the fact that when you wear a mask, tiny microfibers are released, which can cause health problems when inhaled. The risk is increased when masks are reused. This hazard was highlighted in a performance study to be published in the June 2021 issue of Journal of Hazardous Materials.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, mask mandates represent another erosion of freedom, one that further “normalizes” the notion that people are sick unless proven healthy and that it’s acceptable to be forced to cover your face just to go about your daily life, even when you’re outdoors and away from others. Maybe even while you’re swimming.

The public narrative is building prejudice against people who refuse to **wear masks** or **get an experimental vaccine**, such that some are now fearful of people who aren’t

masked or those who choose not to get vaccinated. With societal norms rapidly changing, and an increasingly authoritative environment emerging, it raises the question of whether or not the public will **continue to blindly obey**, no matter the consequences.

## Sources and Reference

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- <sup>2</sup> [BOE March 30, 2021](#)
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- <sup>6</sup> [EL PAÍS April 1, 2021](#)
- <sup>7</sup> [U.S. CDC April 6, 2021](#)
- <sup>8</sup> [EL PAÍS April 7, 2021](#)
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