

Can neck gaiters reduce coronavirus droplet spread? Experts weigh in

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[Health](#) experts are leaning toward the notion that neck gaiters are likely less effective in reducing the spread of respiratory droplets amid the [COVID-19](#) crisis, though some say more research is needed.

A [recent](#) proof-of-principle [study](#) from Duke University tested a simple experimental setup to evaluate the efficacy of some commonly available mask types. Study co-author Warren S. Warren told Fox News the study “was never intended to be a definitive characterization of face masks” due to the small number of masks involved in the study. Warren is a James B. Duke professor of physics, chemistry, radiology and biomedical engineering, and also director at the Center for Molecular and Biomolecular Imaging at Duke University.



Emma Fischer, study co-author and student at Duke University, dons a neck gaiter. Study co-author Warren S. Warren says this neck gaiter is slightly stretchy and opaque when worn, but single layer and thin enough to see a light through it. (Photo Credit: Martin Fischer, Duke University)

The findings from Duke showed that N95 masks without valves performed the best at limiting droplet spread, while face masks with thinner materials and looser fits were less effective, including bandanas and neck gaiters. Cotton masks offer more protection, and surgical masks are even better at blocking droplets, researchers found.

Warren said the thinner fabric of bandanas and neck gaitors likely isn't much good when it comes to reducing droplet spread. However, the Duke University study only tested one neck gaiter on one person.

“We know that covering the mouth and nose can mitigate the amount of infectious droplets released into the air and slow down the ones that do escape,” according to Christopher Sulmonte, project administrator for the Biocontainment Unit at Johns Hopkins University. “More studies need to be done to develop a comprehensive understanding of how unique face covers, like neck gaiters, contribute to the reduction of COVID-19 spread.”

“Neck gaiters, by their design, can’t be easily removed without touching the mask’s fabric, making them less effective from an infection-control standpoint,” Sulmonte added.

Dr. Raed Dweik, chair of Cleveland Clinic’s Respiratory Institute, echoed the call for additional research on the efficacy of neck gaiters but said a neck gaiter is likely better than not wearing a mask at all.

“While this [Duke University] study seems to indicate they [neck gaiters] do not perform as well as cloth masks, it’s likely that wearing a neck gaiter provides more protection from respiratory droplets than not wearing any facial coverings,” Dweik told Fox News. “We encourage everyone to wear the most effective masks they can depending on the situation they are in, but prioritize wearing any facial covering.”

One doctor said he’s ditching neck gaiters for the time being.

“Since the Duke study, I have retired the cool-looking neck gaiter that I stole from my nephew and used to wear when I was out and about

running errands,” Dr. Matt Lambert, emergency medicine doctor and chief medical information officer for the HCI Group, told Fox News.

“We can expect a follow-up study on neck gaiters, and if we find more conclusive evidence about their efficacy, I will go back to wearing it. Unless, of course, my nephew steals it back.”

Lambert said one of the most challenging aspects about this pandemic is the constant evolution of understanding of the virus.

“It is especially challenging when we get conflicting messages around something as important as masks. For me, the take-home message is: Masks are important. I recommend wearing one that performed well in the study.”

Finally, Dr. Dean Winslow, infectious disease physician at Stanford Health Care, agreed that the public should choose the most effective possible mask at their disposal.

“Bandanas and neck gaiters likely don’t work well for two reasons: They usually don’t fit snugly enough around the nose and mouth, and likely the material from which they are made is not as effective as the other face coverings studied in blocking spread of small particle aerosols,” Winslow told Fox News. “The Duke study does NOT show that bandanas and neck gaiters are 'worse than no mask at all.' It actually finds that they just don’t work very well, so my point is ... why don’t you just use one of the types of face coverings we know work well?”

Kayla Rivas is a Health reporter and joined Fox News in April 2020.

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