

## Mask It!



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

**T**his year's horrible flu season swept through my home and office like the epidemic it was. Every member of my household got it, including those who had a flu shot, and many members of our staff. It brought a low rattling cough in the chest, and for some people it quickly went to pneumonia. Antibiotics were taken widely, and there was a run on Tamiflu, the medication that if taken within 48 hours of symptoms occurring can prevent

the flu or make it less serious. When my doctor prescribed Tamiflu, we had to look at multiple pharmacies and wait for 24 hours until our local pharmacy replenished their depleted stock of the medication.

The 2013-2014 flu season included both the H1N1 "swine" flu and other strains. Of course flu vaccinations are recommended, as is staying home if you are sick, washing your hands frequently, and other measures to keep from catching or spreading the virus.

But I go a step further. I wear a surgical mask when I have a cold or the flu, and also when I am in crowded places where others may have the flu, such as on airplanes and commuter trains. I watch in horror during my daily commute as my fellow Caltrain passengers, crammed into the train cars, cough and sneeze into the air or into their hands, then grab the railings along the train doors with those same hands. Ugh.

I am generally the only one in crowded locations wearing a mask, attracting some funny expressions and stares when people notice my covered nose and mouth. I began doing this after a visit to Japan some years ago, when I observed that many Japanese wore face masks to protect themselves or others against contagion of illnesses. I have also worn a surgical mask around my elderly mother and husband when both have been in the hospital and had major surgeries over the past few years.

There are no conclusive statistics on the effectiveness of face masks in preventing the spread of the flu virus or other illnesses. Though drugs and other aspects of treating disease are widely studied, simple preventative measures like wearing a mask are generally overlooked in scientific studies. But one study shows that when

there is a sick family member in the house, other family members can cut their risk of getting sick by 60 percent to 80 percent by using face masks consistently and correctly. The Harvard School of Public Health recommends wearing masks when one has the flu or is in proximity to those who might have it.

So why don't more people in the United States emulate the Japanese and wear surgical masks in public, especially during a period like this past winter when the flu reached pandemic proportions? Of course, the answer is simple. Surgical masks look silly. They cover some of the most attractive features of our faces, at least as advertising and the beauty industry would have it, our noses and mouths. It's ego that gets in the way of our taking this simple health precaution. And to tell the truth, the existing white or light blue surgical masks are pretty dull and do little for facial beauty.

I say let's make the surgical mask into a new fashion statement. Can't you just see the varieties that could be created? A screened-on photo showing the facial characteristics underneath, or different facial characteristics? Moustaches, beards, goatees. Famous people's recognizable chins, noses, mouths? Different colors and patterns, words making statements, speech bubbles coming out of the mouth?

Most of the masks in Japan are of the boring surgical variety, but a few are inventive, like the one with the lower half of a tiger's face on it. Let's face it, other countries, like Japan, have a history of masks, like those that Noh or Kabuki dancers wear. We just don't have this tradition in the United States, unless you count Batman and a few other masked crusaders. So we are starting from behind in creating a culture accepting of, or entertained by, masks.

Commercial culture is more central to the American experience, so let's think of the advertising opportunities. One could be paid or receive their masks free for wearing a corporate logo on them. Think of a mask bearing the Ford logo or Macy's? Or designer masks by Donna Karan or Giorgio Armani? How about conservative slogans or political figures or liberal slogans and figures on masks? Or for us more intellectual types, what about *The New York Times*, NPR or even The Commonwealth Club printed on our masks?

I think we are really missing a cultural and business opportunity, to make the lowly face mask into a cool item. Or maybe I just want company from others wearing masks during flu season, so I don't stand out so much. 🍷

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