

The evolution of masks



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By Chris Drost

By all indications, it looks like the practice of wearing masks in Canada is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

As early as the 17th century during a plague epidemic, doctors wore beaked masks, like that of a bird. At the time, it was believed that disease was spread through miasmas, or bad smells in the area. The beak of the bird mask was loaded with spices, herbs and dried flowers to fend off the bad odours believed to be the cause of the illness.

Before the 1918 Spanish flu, doctors and nurses who were treating contagious patients, wore masks as a regular practice. During the pandemic, cities around the world made mask wearing mandatory. Women who previously knitted socks and rolled bandages during the war, switched to sewing masks, although mask wearing in Canada was not enthusiastically adopted.

According to an article, 'A brief history of masks from the 17th century plague to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic,' by Catherine Carstairs, professor of history at the University of Guelph, masks were 'widely unpopular' and even when mandatory, people did not wear them. On the contrary, in Japan, the public embraced mask wearing during the Spanish flu pandemic. This practice continued well into the 1970s when more vaccines became available. The Japanese apparently saw it as a sign of 'modernity.' By the late 1980s as the effectiveness of the flu vaccines declined there was a resurgence in the wearing of masks. SARS in 2003 and avian influenza further increased the use of masks and the government encouraged all sick people to wear a mask to protect others and as a preventative measure against illness. When H1N1 hit Japan in 2009, the sick were blamed for not wearing masks while travelling abroad.

China too, has a long history of mask wearing. During the pneumonic plague epidemic in 1910-1911 masks were worn. Then in 1949 when the communists came to power, the fear of germ warfare resulted in widescale mask wearing. It was the same with the SARS scare in 2003. In recent years the government has encouraged masks as a protection against the pollution and smog problem that exists in that country.

Flip forward to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 Canada. Carstairs reported that one of the first infected people in Canada was a student from Western University who visited Wuhan over the Christmas holidays. She wore a mask on the plane on the way back and when she began to feel ill she went to the hospital wearing a mask. She did not infect anyone. With the realization that mask wearing will be with us for some time to come, the fashion industry has gotten on board. It is now possible to buy an outfit with matching mask. Individuals are showing their personality through customized masks that include sequins and other bling. Others are searching the cupboard for vintage fabrics that feature 70s designs. Pinterest recently announced a 'Make a Statement Mask Challenge' to encourage the use of masks, all which will be posted for inspiration for others. Planning a wedding in the near future? Forget the traditional wedding favours, some brides and grooms are having custom masks made with their photo and wedding date on them for guests to wear.

The web is full of ideas for producing masks with a clear plastic inset, promoted as useful for teachers or for families with individuals who have hearing challenges and lip reading is important.

It is now possible to have a photo of the bottom part of your face turned into a mask. Others are embracing it as a way to share their favourite photo of the family pooch while some are using the opportunity to make a political statement or sometimes, just to have fun.

Whatever the design, the important thing to remember, according to public health authorities, is to use tightly woven fabric, preferably pure cotton, and ensure the mask amply covers your nose, mouth and chin.