

'Wear and store masks properly'

Experts: Maintaining hygiene of face coverings also important for safety

By CLARISSA CHUNG

clarissachung@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: With international health guidelines now advising people to wear face masks, experts say they must be worn and stored properly to ensure maximum effectiveness.

Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist and biostatistician Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said a clean and dry surgical mask could be reused but only if it was worn for a short time.

"Disposable surgical masks should only be used once.

"However, if the duration of the mask usage is too short, and the mask is still dry, without any droplets like saliva or nasal secretion, and the individual is able to maintain proper hygiene by putting it in a clean compartment before reuse, then there should be no issue.

"Another suggestion is for the public to wear washable, non-surgical masks with similar characteristics to surgical masks – a water resistant outer layer and an absorbent inner layer," she said.

To properly dispose of the mask, Dr Malina said it should be placed inside a plastic or paper wrapping before putting it in a rubbish bin.

"The survival of viruses, if present, in the environment usually lasts for about a few hours in our climate. Any potential infection transmission from contaminants in the mask is extremely low," she said.

Universiti Malaya public health medicine

specialist Prof Dr Victor Hoe said although surgical masks were not meant to be reused, those who want to reuse them must ensure they were kept in good condition.

"The only tool we have is by observation. We need to ensure the inner and outer surfaces of the mask do not have any defect.

"This means no tears or fibres coming out of the surface. When we see this, we should dispose of the mask," he said, adding that wearers must also ensure their hands were washed, dried and if necessary, sanitised, before handling the mask.

"Limit touching the surface of the mask, especially the inner layer, and try to handle the mask by holding the edges," he said.

To properly store the mask for reuse, Dr Hoe said the inner surface must be protected from contaminants.

"Fold the mask inwards with the inner surface touching each other. Put the folded mask in an envelope safely," he said.

