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NEWS RELEASE

Face masks during exercise: UP experts weigh in on what you should consider when deciding

Two University of Pretoria (UP) researchers have offered useful tips to gym bunnies and sports enthusiasts hoping to get back into action as the world adjusts to a new normal caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Professor Christa Janse van Rensburg, head of Sports Medicine in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and Dr Jessica Hamuy Blanco said that while it may pose some unique challenges, it is advisable to keep using cloth masks during exercise.

The blog post, which has been now shared in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, also received a mention in the UK's Trail Running Magazine, as well as The New York Times.

The two UP colleagues wrote the article in order to share their expert opinions and provide support in times of uncertainty. "I am a sports enthusiast and like to be active. I am also a responsible citizen who needs to protect myself and others from getting ill or spreading the disease. When the South African government regulated wearing masks in public spaces, questions arose around whether people should wear a face mask during exercise and on what should clinicians who, like myself, work in the field of sports medicine be advising," Prof van Rensburg explained.

"As pointed out earlier, there are quite a few things, including guidelines on athletes' safe return to sport, advice on gradually return to previous fitness levels, ensuring nutrition and mental health are optimal, and that athletes are sleeping restfully. Athletes and professionals working in the field need to be aware of symptoms of COVID-19, the protocols to follow in case of symptoms, and the athlete's subsequent return to sport after recovery," she said.

Their recommendations come as many community-based measures to control the spread of COVID-19 have relied on the implementation of measures such as social distancing, hand hygiene and wearing non-medical face masks in public areas. Explaining the rationale behind this their blog post reads, "This recommendation is based on the concept of 'source control' to prevent droplets produced by the person wearing the mask from spreading to other people or onto surfaces. It is much easier to reduce droplet spread by blocking larger droplets as they come out of a person's mouth, than it is to block them once they have dissipated and become much smaller."

Also discussed in their blog is how to handle items such as masks and buffs during exercise without creating any further risk of infection. One of the ways suggested by the clinicians is the use of two masks or buffs in case one gets wet during the exercise. The clinicians also advised that maintaining social distancing while exercising is vital, as well as ensuring you have hand sanitisers within reach at all times.

In the blog, Prof van Rensburg and Dr Blanco advised that someone suffering from a febrile illness should not be exercising at all, especially with a mask on. Elaborating further on this idea, Dr Blanco explained that the combination of the illness itself and the impact of wearing a mask could result in the person developing complications.

“When a person is ill and has a fever, there are various physiological mechanisms at play that will increase the risk of serious complications if the person exercises. A fever occurs as a result of an altered temperature in response to illness. This can affect the body’s appropriate temperature regulation during physical activity and increases the chances of dangerous complications such as heatstroke. Both illness and physical activity, particularly at high intensities, are a source of physiological stress on the body. When the two occur concurrently, there is potential for a multitude of complications in almost every organ system. These include an increased risk of skeletal muscle breakdown, electrolyte abnormalities, hyper-responsive airways, altered heart rhythms, and increased risk of sudden cardiac death,” she said.

Dr Blanco said that while it was almost impossible to determine what the future will hold in the world of sports, it is important to adapt and roll with the punches.

“I think one of the biggest ways in which sport may change, at least for the foreseeable future, is that we will have to sacrifice some of sport’s entertainment value for the sake of safety. We have to do our part to limit public exposure as much as possible. Fans who hope to attend live sporting competitions may have to wait a while before being able to do so. Technology will have to play a bigger role than before and could open up new revenue streams as income from ticket sales will inevitably decrease. For the financial model of the professional sporting world to survive, there are going to have to be new, innovative ways to engage with consumers. Professional sport involves a lot of travel to and from events, and this will have to be appropriately adapted to limit viral spread. Regulations will have to be closely adhered to,” she said.

To read the complete blog post click here: <https://blogs.bmj.com/bjbm/2020/06/12/should-people-wear-a-face-mask-during-exercise-what-should-clinicians-advise/>

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Professor Christa Janse van Rensburg, head of Sports Medicine in the Faculty of Health Sciences is available for interviews. To arrange an interview please contact Liesel Swart on cell: 082 672 0078, or email: liesel@roundtree.co.za.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 112-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences,

clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In June 2019, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa's research-intensive universities, UP launched the *Future Africa Campus* in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition, UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In 2020 UP will launch Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za