

Many New Yorkers defying coronavirus mask orders, and they say it's for these reasons

There's no hiding without a mask in virus-stricken New York City, the American epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic.

New York requires people to wear face coverings when in close proximity to others in public. As people grow wearier of the extended lockdown, some residents complain that requirement infringes on individual liberties.

Residents are caught in the middle of a debate over when and where, exactly, it is necessary to wear a mask in a city where COVID-19 has now claimed more than 20,000 lives.



In this Monday, May 11, 2020 photo, a man walks his dog without a face mask in Tompkins Square Park in New York. New York's governor has ordered masks for anyone out in public who can't stay at least six feet away from other people. Yet, while the rule is clear, New Yorkers have adopted their own interpretation of exactly when masks are required, especially outdoors. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

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Since April 17, everyone in New York state has been required to wear a face-covering in any place where they can't stay at least 6 feet away from people who don't live with them. Only children younger than 2 and people with a medical excuse are exempt.

Yet, while the rule is clear, New Yorkers have adopted their own interpretation of when masks are required.

It isn't unusual to see groups of park goers and essential workers, even police officers, leaving their masks dangling as they squeeze past people on sidewalks or chat with friends. Masks are, perhaps, most rarely used among people trying to exercise.



In this Monday, May 11, 2020 photo, a jogger wearing a face mask runs in between a biker and a pedestrian not wearing masks as they make their way over the Williamsburg bridge in New York. New York's governor has ordered masks for anyone out in public who can't stay at least six feet away from other people. Yet, while the rule is clear, New Yorkers have adopted their own interpretation of exactly when masks are required, especially outdoors. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Eric Leventhal, 36, felt a sneeze coming and panicked.

The Brooklynite left his cloth face mask at home for a morning run in a park last week. Walking home, he turned toward an empty street and let the sneeze out, hoping no one would notice.

“I picked my head up and I caught eyes with a woman who was wearing a mask, an older woman,” Leventhal recently said. “She was just kind of shaking her head.”

As warmer weather beckons people outside, more chances emerge for confrontations between mask-wearers and mask doubters.

“Everything is fraught with life and death consequences, and it’s just hard to grapple with that at any one moment,” Leventhal said. “That’s a long way of saying, I should be wearing one, probably, but it’s difficult when you run, so I don’t.”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who says people are fine not wearing a mask if they are out walking alone but need to put one on if someone approaches, on Tuesday called the act of masks “reciprocal responsibility.”

Warning that the state isn’t out of danger yet, Cuomo on Tuesday urged New Yorkers to wear masks out of respect for the nurses and doctors who have died to protect people from the pandemic.

He said people should be aware that masks, which are worn to reduce the wearer’s chance of infecting others, are a sign of respect to everyone they walk past, as well as to workers pulling society through the outbreak.

“This mask says, ‘I respect the nurses and doctors who killed themselves through this virus to save other people. And I respect the nurses and the doctors, so I’m not going to infect anyone or allow anyone else to be infected unnecessarily so I don’t cause more stress on the nurses and the doctors,’” Cuomo said.



In this Monday, May 11, 2020 photo, men play ping pong without face masks at Tompkins Square Park in New York. New York's governor has ordered masks for anyone out in public who can't stay at least six feet away from other people. Yet, while the rule is clear, New Yorkers have adopted their own interpretation of exactly when masks are required, especially outdoors. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Elissa Stein, a 55-year-old activist and graphic designer living in Manhattan, went as far as to make T-shirts with a more profane version of the message "Wear Your Mask." Stein gets stares when she wears the shirt, but she said it's worth it given the stakes.

"It shouldn't be something that you take lightly," she said. "This is not a joke."

There are no fines, under the state rule, for not wearing a mask. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has said he favors education over enforcement, pledging to distribute 7.5 million masks to the public.

The personal politics of masks caught up to Norm Scott, 63, of Brooklyn, when he got heat on one website for saying studies show the risk of the virus spreading outdoors, compared to indoors, is minimal. Scott said he merely wanted to bring perspective to the situation.

"I'm not telling people to not wear a mask," said Scott, who says he, too, wears one in public.

But, he added, “posting on a public forum about how runners or millennials are going to infect us is ridiculous. ... I believe in social responsibility. I don’t believe in social shaming.”

CORONAVIRUS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



In this Monday, May 11, 2020 photo, a couple, not wearing face masks, sit at a distance from each other on a park bench in Tompkins Square Park in New York. New York’s governor has ordered masks for anyone out in public who can’t stay at least six feet away from other people. Yet, while the rule is clear, New Yorkers have adopted their own interpretation of exactly when masks are required, especially outdoors. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

In Brooklyn, Dovid Shlomo Halevi Kurtz, 69, said he doesn’t feel any guilt about being barefaced. He is confident in God’s plan, he said. Also, the mask fogs up his glasses.

“I can’t breathe and then I can’t see, what good is that?” Kurtz said after finishing a walk in Prospect Park with gloves on — but no mask. “Should I wear them? No. I don’t have (COVID-19), I’m not giving it to anybody and I’m not getting it.”

Besides, he said, “It’s like a car accident, God forbid, or a lightning bolt. If God wants you to have it, you’ll have it. If God doesn’t want you to have it, you won’t have it.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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