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COVID-19 PREVENTION FOR RETAILERS IN SOUTH AFRICA: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF AND CUSTOMER SAFETY

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The South African Department of Health released the **National Guidelines for Fabric Face Masks in South Africa** on 10 April. In doing so, the Government endorses cloth face masks as a means to ensure the health and safety of all South Africans.

These recommendations are intended to guide how to address COVID-19 health and safety in retail settings for **Chambers of Commerce, large and small retailers, employee bodies, unions, casual employees and the general public**, among others.

HOW IS COVID-19 SPREAD?

- **COVID-19 is mainly spread through talking, coughs, and sneezes by a person infected with COVID-19.**
- The early phase of COVID-19 infection includes a build-up of virus in the body with very high viral loads being reached a few days before symptoms occur. **When people do not have symptoms they are likely to be mobile and therefore infect others.** It is estimated that around 50% of transmissions occur through this route.
- The high infection rates in European countries and North America have been driven by **close contact between people** – typically on public transport, close proximity outdoor areas, retail stores and other workplaces.

¹ These recommendations developed by Dr Warren Parker, Public Health and Communication Specialist, Cape Town, South Africa (covid19prevention@icloud.com). The recommendations have been reviewed and are endorsed by: Prof Shabir Moosa, Dr Salim Choonara (Specialist Urologist), Dr Riyas Fadal (Bruma Medical and Life Healthcare), Dr Scott Ferguson (Family Practitioner, Kenilworth Medicross) Dr M Minty, Dr Yasmin Goga (Paediatric Haematologist, Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital), Monika van Zyl, Grant de Sousa, Hans Fouche, Dr Ryan Soldin (Pathologist), Dr Nana Ayisi-Boateng, and Prof Jeremy Howard (Founder of Masks4All movement, Data Science Institute, University of San Francisco). Contact: Tyrone Rubin at Masks4All - help@africamasks4all.com. **This document is current to the date shown above. Please note government guidelines and regulations regarding COVID-19 must be adhered to.**

WHY SHOULD RETAILERS FOCUS ON COVID-19 PREVENTION?

- **Outbreaks of COVID-19 are regularly reported among staff in retail settings globally**, and such instances have already occurred in South Africa – for example, at Dischem in Boksburg, Gauteng, where 24 staff members tested positive.
- Many countries have introduced face mask guidelines for the general public and **the trend in all countries is towards mandatory use of cloth face coverings or face masks for COVID-19 public health and safety in close proximity settings such as on public transport and in shops and buildings**. Examples include: Europe: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Austria, Germany. Latin America: Mexico, Chile, Ecuador. North America: United States, Canada. Africa: South Africa, Kenya. South Asia: India. East Asia (surgical face masks available): China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan.

CLOTH FACE MASKS ARE VITAL FOR COVID-19 PREVENTION IN RETAIL SETTINGS

- **A cloth face mask serves as an effective barrier to prevent the spread of COVID-19.** However, it requires that all people who are in close proximity to each other wear a mask. Customers and staff remain at risk unless all people in the outlet are wearing a mask. It should be added that the risks of transmission are far greater in indoor settings where there is limited ventilation. Studies show respiratory droplets and viral particles from a cough or sneeze travel more than 2-meters if a person is not wearing a mask.
- To date, **a number of retail outlets in South Africa have carried signage to the effect that face masks do not work**, ostensibly in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines. The position of the WHO is continuously being revised, but it remains that considerable confusion continues due to their initial guidance. On 6 April the WHO revised their position on public wearing of masks by including guidance that countries could determine their own requirements regarding masks – but still, unfortunately, only recommend masks for people who feel ill. This contradicts the recognition by the WHO that people who are pre-symptomatic can be infectious. **This signage is not in line with the recommendations of the South African Department of Health and should be removed.**
- To note further, **some of this signage includes reference to gloves**. Gloves are not recommended for use by the general public as they offer no benefit for COVID-19 prevention in public settings. The coronavirus cannot penetrate the skin and simple handwashing measures are adequate. Gloves remain relevant for retail staff who would ordinarily wear gloves in the course of their work as a hygienic measure.

- A number of retail outlets have adopted the use of **plastic face shields** for use by staff. These are not necessarily effective for preventing respiratory droplets or viral particles from being expelled as air may move around the sides or bottom. They may also not be effective for preventing particles from being inhaled for the same reasons. It is recommended that their general use be evaluated, noting that the addition of cloth face masks is necessary to reduce the risk of transmission and acquisition.
- In some outlets, large **transparent perspex or glass shields** have been placed in front of cashiers but these may not extend sufficiently to protect packers or other staff. Additional protection could be considered to overcome closer proximity in stores where the spatial arrangements make physical distancing challenging.
- **While hand hygiene is a good practice, it is best practiced at key moments.** Some retail stores provide hand sanitizer on entry and exit to storefronts. This remains a good practice. Hand sanitizing reduces the risk of potential touch transfer to the face and face masks serve as a reminder not to touch one's face.
- **The strongest prevention effects can be achieved by practicing multiple prevention measures.** The South African Fabric Mask Guidelines make reference to maintaining a distance of 1,5 metres from others and this should be practiced as often as feasible in conjunction with ensuring all people in close proximity wear face masks and encouraging hand sanitizing at key moments including entering and leaving retail outlets. There may be opportunities to **improve spatial arrangements in stores for close proximity areas** to maximise physical distancing – for example, using only every second check-out point.

PUTTING FACE MASKS INTO PRACTICE

- The South African Fabric Mask Guidelines provide further detailed information on mask use, care and re-use. This includes retaining at least two masks to allow for cleaning and wearing. **Simple guidelines for cleaning of masks are provided. Chemicals should never be used to clean a mask as they may be harmful when breathing through the mask.** Ordinary soap and warm water are recommended along with ironing or sun drying.
- **Staff need to be trained** on effective and appropriate mask use, care and reuse. Masks should never be shared and should be cared for as an essential resource for COVID-19 prevention. Training is necessary to observe the broader mix of preventive practices that will keep everyone safe. Improved signage for customers and staff on COVID-19 prevention should also be considered in retail stores.

- **Many factories in South Africa are repurposing for cloth face mask production.** This provides a supply line for retail outlets. The South African Fabric Mask Guidelines provide a point of reference for choice of fabrics and design. Further and more detailed specifications are anticipated. **For staff in retail stores, it is necessary to consider the comfort and breathability of masks that will be used for extended periods.** Also to consider not only guidance for the use of face masks by staff, but related practices such as maintaining a physical distance and the provision of hand sanitizing and cleaning of commonly exposed surfaces.
- Current lock down measures considerably reduce the risks of close overlap between people in retail settings due to reduced numbers. This will change if lockdown measures are relaxed. **It is recommended that retail stores increasingly consider mandatory wearing of face masks in stores by staff and customers. Face masks for children should only be worn if under adult supervision. Face masks should never be worn by infants and toddlers as there is a risk of restriction of breathing or choking. Physical and other distancing measures can be applied in the case of younger children, toddlers and infants who are not wearing masks.**
- Should the intensity of the epidemic increase, it may also be useful to introduce contactless temperature testing and ensuring consistent availability of hand sanitizer at storefronts. Patrons should be encouraged from unnecessarily touching items, and additional protection may be needed for fresh items. **Signage regarding customer and staff safety should be increased.**
- While cloth face masks are not medical devices, and standards may vary, **it is recommended that retail stores assess the effectiveness of cloth masks that may be offered for sale.** Clear guidelines should be given regarding the points raised above regarding children and infants.
- **The current lock down measures provide a window of opportunity** for effective procurement, training and educational measures in retail stores. This advantage should be exploited in the interests of the health of all staff and customers and the people of South Africa as a whole.