

# How to protect your skin during mask use

*Dr. Whitney High, director of the UCHHealth Dermatology Clinic at University of Colorado Hospital and dermatology professor with the University of Colorado School of Medicine, shares the following information.*

Masks are vital to COVID-19 pandemic control practices. However, we've seen increasing skin problems related to mask use, often referred to as "maskne."

"Maskne" might better be called "acne mechanica" by dermatology specialists. This is because it is caused by the "mechanics" of mask wearing, including increased heat, friction and occlusion/moisture. These mechanics lead to the clogging of pores, making people predisposed to worsened acne, or even acne where the wearer did not have the problem before.

Here are a few things you can do to prevent "maskne:"

- **Wash your mask often or wear a disposable mask for the appropriate amount of time.** If you are using a fabric mask, perhaps for off-duty hours, or for non-health care related duties on campus, make sure you are keeping it clean/laundered. Dirt and skin oils can accumulate on the mask and lead to bacterial overgrowth. If you are using a health care-appropriate surgical/medical mask for work duties, make sure you are not using it for longer than UCHHealth recommends. No one wants to waste PPE, and circumstances in this regard may change, but using a mask for longer than is recommended/intended for that type can worsen "maskne."
- **Wash your face.** After wearing your mask for long periods, it is wise to wash your face using a bland cleanser. This dislodges dirt and oils and prevents blocked pores. Make sure you dry with a clean towel and change towels frequently. Facial cleansers often recommended at CU/UCH Dermatology include Cetaphil facial cleanser, Cerave hydrating facial cleanser and Vanicream gentle facial cleanser. At many large national retailers, there is a more affordable store-brand, packaged similarly to these major brands.
- **Use a bland facial moisturizer.** There is not any single facial moisturizer that is best to prevent "maskne," and you may already have a brand you like. I recommend using a product that is non-comedogenic (doesn't cause acne). In general, products with fewer ingredients, and are of a thinner consistency can be beneficial. Facial moisturizers often recommended at CU/UCH Dermatology include Cetaphil, Cerave and Vanicream facial moisturizers. Similar to facial cleansers, more-affordable store brands from large national retailers are often very good.

- **Wear less or even (preferably) no makeup when prolonged mask use is anticipated.** The American Academy of Dermatology states that wearing skin makeup under a mask can cause increased clogging of pores and worsens breakouts. Makeup residue will also dirty your mask more quickly.
- **Consider careful addition of topical anti-acne products.** If you are having a breakout and it is not severe enough to justify a visit to the dermatologist, you could consider the careful addition of a skin care product that contains benzoyl peroxide or salicylic acid, as these are widely utilized for acne. However, because of the occlusion of the mask, these products could prove more irritating. Add these products carefully and sparingly to make sure they improve your condition, and are well-tolerated, without making the problem worse.

Sometimes a breakout related to mask wearing is not simply “maskne.” Other problems that can occur include:

**Allergic contact dermatitis to something in a particular mask** – Some masks contain formaldehyde or polypropylene, and a few people can be allergic to these chemicals. Typically, allergic reactions are often very sharply circumscribed and limited to the areas that the mask touches the face. If you suspect an allergy, it might be reasonable to change brands and styles of masks (while maintaining appropriate levels of protection) and see if the rash improves. If it does not, it is wise to consult a dermatologist regarding your suspicions.

**Rosacea** – This is a skin condition often exemplified by flushing/blushing and sometimes an acne-like eruption. People with rosacea tend to have triggers that make their disease worse, such as caffeine, alcohol, sun, etc. The warmth and humidity of mask wearing can be a rosacea trigger for some people. If this seems to be the problem, consultation with a dermatologist is appropriate.

**Seborrheic dermatitis** – Another chronic skin disease, this ranges from mild dandruff on the scalp to a flaky rash on the face and can be very itchy. If you have a history of seborrheic dermatitis, it may change or worsen with mask wearing. Patients with seborrheic dermatitis should consult their dermatologist to manage the flare in their disease.

The [UCH Dermatology Service](#) (720.848.0500) is ready and eager to assist anyone experiencing mask-related skin disease. Dermatology clinics and providers along the Front Range can be found on [the UCHealth website](#).