

Mask Asphyxia in the Innocent Breeds

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ABSTRACT

Face masks, no doubt, are the first line of defence during this pandemic. Besides health protection, mask litter has reportedly polluted the land and water and reports of the wildlife entangled and choked in the elastic straps of the face masks are published off and on. Therefore, guidelines must be issued to the authorities and the public for appropriate handling and disposal of the “pandemic related litter” or else the climate change and the environmental disasters may become another future pandemics.

KEYWORDS: Face mask, Asphyxia, Wild life, Litter, Pandemic.

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February 7th, 2021, witnessed an eye catching news in one of the newspapers. It was a story of a 2 – year old pet dog, seemingly normal in energy and personality, which developed vomiting, off and on. The keepers of the pet dog noticed loss of appetite as the dog was not eating even the homemade chicken. X-ray of the animal’s abdomen, after consultation from the veterinarians revealed two face masks in the stomach which were obstructing the gastric outlet. The dog had a surgery and the masks were removed. It was traced back that the pet was mostly leashed and supervised outdoors, except when it was wandering in the backyard of the owner’s house.¹ The dog swallowed the masks from the pen in the backyard. According to the veterinarian, it could have been more worse, as the mask may have caused choking and death. During the unforeseen pandemic of

COVID-19, people must wear masks for their safety while ensuring that these masks may not pose a new health risk for the innocent animals and birds.²

Face masks were used in East Asian countries, as they experienced SARS pandemics earlier, but they became pretty new to daily lives of many nations around the world in the current pandemic. Besides health protection, mask litter have polluted the land and water. Reports of the wildlife entangled in the elastic straps of the face masks can be viewed. News of choking of marine dwellers can be seen in print and electronic media.² Dolphins, turtles and seagulls suffer fatal gut and throat obstructions and can be seen dead on the seashores; on the other hand birds get entangled in the straps of face masks and are unable to release their claws from the so called “free prison”. The metal strip in the masks for adjustment on the nose is another hazardous element in the waste, which may get into the respiratory or the digestive systems of the wildlife causing perforations and damage.

Face mask is an essential tool to prevent the spread of COVID-19.³ The masks are staying in our lives for a while; they are not going away in the near future. Apart from the protection, the used masks are becoming another source of pollution, as they are not properly disposed off. Synthetic masks when degrade into micro plastic molecules in the water pose a risk for animals as well as humans. When plastic is broken down it releases certain

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harmful chemicals which can pollute the oceans. As the lock down eases and we are out of our homes, we can see face masks on the roadsides, parks, streets and anywhere, including the huge piles of waste.⁴ Particularly in the big cities of developing countries like ours, for example Lahore and Karachi, where we are facing serious trash disposal issues now a days, the mask litter becomes another hazard. The waste collectors can be seen separating face masks which are less dirty, and lets think of them cleaning the masks and selling them again on roads and places where face masks are either less available or are not valued by people for use, thus making another source of spreading diseases.

A number of cases in wildlife regarding harmful effects of face masks have been reported in the western countries where people keep pets, animal clinics exist and veterinary science is commonly practiced. In developing countries where above-mentioned norms do not usually prevail, pets and wildlife might face serious consequences from being caught in the face mask litter. Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) have warned the governments of dumped face masks as becoming an environmental disaster that might last for generations even after the pandemic.⁵

The science of mask is evolving rapidly over the year. From protection to fashion, the use of face mask has a penetrating effect in our routine lives. It's the new normal, which intends to stay for long. The use of a mask as a preventive measure during the pandemic has been emphasized by the governments and policy makers all over the world through print, electronic and social media.⁶ Guidelines on the use of masks by health works and the general public can be accessed easily. However not much has been commented on the proper disposal of the masks, or if there are guidelines, after looking at the misery of the innocent animals, they are not yet seem to be implemented in a true spirit.

Most of the general waste affecting the wildlife is preventable if the trash is properly and responsibly disposed off. The same goes for the face masks. Face masks aren't the only trash, personal protective equipments (PPEs) and latex gloves have also been added in the discarded items in high number during the pandemic.⁷ There are variable views and studies regarding the impact of face masks on the environment. Whether to use

disposable face masks or reusable fabric face masks, and further reusable face masks with disposable filters, and still further whether to hand wash or machine wash the fabric masks is still a debate and new studies are coming day in a day out in the mask science.

To keep the words simple and the message easy, surgical and medical marks must be used by the health workers, particularly in the critical areas; hospitals, clinics and laboratories. The non-medical personnel must wear masks according to their job requirements and must maintain a proper social distancing along with the usage of masks.⁸ Reusable masks with disposable filters can be used and regularly washed following the instructions for the fabric. One must try to carry an extra mask, so that if something goes wrong, one must not need to buy a disposable mask and throw it away after use. The mask must be thrown in a bin with a lid at home. Mask loops must be snipped, to prevent animals being entangled and mask must be cut in the center, preventing its illegal reuse. Disposable masks must not be put in recycling as they can get caught in specialist recycling equipment and can become a potential biohazard for the waste workers. Governments must put their role in highlighting the proper disposal of the face masks, PPEs and gloves educating the nations through print and electronic media. Guidelines must be issued to the authorities handling the waste and the public to overcome the "pandemic related litter"



Be careful: the face mask litter from pandemic may kill the innocent breeds. (Photograph by Ali Hassan Rizvi)

issue. As the announcements of reducing the spread of the virus were important, so are the Standard Operating Protocols for the proper waste disposal that came along with the pandemic. It is essential for the developing countries, in particular, and developed nations also, to look into this matter, or else the climate change and the environmental issues may become our future pandemics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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None to disclose.

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