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**Masking After Thanksgiving Break: Protect Yourself and Your Peers**

As we return to campus after Thanksgiving break, it's important to consider the risks of respiratory illnesses like COVID-19, the flu, and the common cold. During this time, we gather with family and friends, which increases the chance of exposure to these viruses. With finals week starting in just a few short days, it’s crucial to keep in mind that respiratory illnesses can spread quickly and make it harder for you and your peers to perform well during exams.

**1. Masks Stop the Spread of Germs**

Flu, cold, and COVID-19 viruses spread mainly through respiratory droplets. These droplets are released when we cough, sneeze, talk, or even breathe. Wearing a mask helps trap these droplets, reducing the chances of them spreading to others (Cambridge University). This is especially important in public or communal spaces, where many people are in close proximity.

**2. Testing Shows People Can Be Contagious for Longer Than Expected**

While the CDC recommends isolating for 5 days after testing positive for COVID-19, studies show that many people can still test positive after 7 days, particularly if they have symptoms. For example, a study of student-athletes found that 27% of people tested positive on rapid antigen tests even after a full 7 days of isolation (Journal of the American Medical Association). This highlights the need for extended isolation to prevent spreading the virus to others. Individuals should stay in isolation until they no longer have symptoms and are no longer testing positive.

**3. Flu and Cold Viruses Can Be Spread Before Symptoms Appear**

Both the flu and COVID-19 can be spread even before a person feels sick. For COVID-19, people can transmit the virus up to 48 hours before showing symptoms, and for the flu, transmission can happen one day before symptoms begin (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Wearing a mask during this time can help prevent unknowingly infecting others.

**4. Masks Protect Vulnerable People**

People with weakened immune systems, older adults, and young children are more vulnerable to severe illness from flu, cold, and COVID-19. Wearing a mask helps reduce the chance of these individuals being exposed to the virus (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). On a campus shared by students from many different backgrounds, this extra layer of protection is critical for community health.

**5. Masks Help Keep the Campus Open and Safe**

During cold, flu, and COVID-19 seasons, taking simple precautions like wearing a mask can prevent the spread of illness and help maintain a healthy campus. By reducing the spread of these viruses, we can avoid large outbreaks that might cause campus closures or limit access to communal spaces (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Masking helps keep classrooms, study areas, and social spaces available for everyone to use.

**Conclusion**

Wearing a mask is one of the easiest ways to protect yourself, others, and the entire campus community during flu, cold, and COVID-19 season. By masking up, testing regularly, and isolating longer when necessary, we can reduce the spread of these viruses and ensure a healthier, safer environment for everyone.

**Sources:**

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