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No heavy hand behind Arra's pending mask order

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Mandatory face covering to help guard against the spread of COVID-19 will be implemented when Grey-Bruce enters Stage 3 of Ontario's reopening plan, Dr. Ian Arra, the region's medical officer of health, announced Friday.

He doesn't know when that will be. But since most of Ontario entered Stage 2 on June 12, it's likely the province would now consider moving to the final stage, Arra said in an interview Friday.

If he knew exactly when Stage 3 was going to start he would give people notice and make mask-wearing a requirement the first day. Otherwise, three days after would be optimal, he said.

Arra issued a notice on July 7 of his pending order to require most people to wear a mask covering the nose, mouth and chin in public indoor settings, including the areas of businesses accessible to the public.

Arra's order will require three things of businesses: to "try their best" to ensure at least a two-metre distance among staff and customers; to have hand sanitizer at entrances and exits and to post signs that say masks are required under his order.

If someone isn't wearing a mask, or takes one off for an extended period, staff are to remind people of the order, he said. All staff will have to wear masks too.

But "there is no need" to turn away customers who don't wear one, Arra said in a news release.

A new [frequently asked questions](#) information sheet on the health unit's website says a bandana, scarf or cloth would do for face covering, as would a non-medical mask.

It notes people with COVID-19 who have no symptoms could still be contagious. It also notes face shields, while deemed by the World Health Organization as "better than nothing," aren't equal to masks because they have no filtering capacity.

The order will remain in place for four weeks and could be renewed.

"This will provide time to develop more permanent solutions such as municipal bylaws or provincial regulations," the release said. "We are seeing increasing complacency in the community with earlier recommendations of physical distancing."

He said Stage 3 reopening will include activities "with highest contact intensity and that would require significant modifications to maintain public health safety. Mask use will reduce the risk for the most vulnerable of us."

That will include reopening bars, movie theatres and gyms. He would expect sporadic COVID-19 cases as a result, but the extent of cases depends on people doing their part, he said.

There's a maximum \$5,000 fine for violating the order, but Arra said he has no interest in enforcement. He wants everyone to do their part and he said he's optimistic they will. "Enforcement in general will be based on the good faith of individuals to participate, as rigorous enforcement will not be desired," the release said. Arra said acting with a heavy hand would just invite pushback.

And it would take an employer who disregards his order, is the subject of lots of complaints and has had repeated inspector visits to reach the level when enforcement would be contemplated, Arra said.

Even then, he could order them directly to follow health measures without invoking the enforcement provisions of the mask order, he said.

"I haven't seen a situation where an employer is intentionally not following the best practice to the degree that would make this order useful."

There will be groups exempted from the mask order, including churches, Arra said, because they're already part of the Stage 2 provincial order to limit gatherings to 30 per cent capacity.

Some categories of people won't have to wear a face covering either. There will be exceptions for children younger than two years and for those younger than five years of age, or developmentally at that level, who would be unable to tolerate or refuse to wear one.

Other exceptions will be allowed for those who find a mask intolerable due to any medical condition (no medical note needed); or for reasons under the Ontario Human Rights Code, including religious reasons.

"Asking people to wear a face covering is another tool we can use to prevent spread of COVID-19," Arra said in the release. But it must be used with distancing, hand hygiene and the same care that people have been taking to limit the spread of the virus.