

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes
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Country: **AUSTRIA**

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Regulations and practices of wearing facial masks in Austria

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Austrian government made it compulsory to cover one's mouth and nose with a mechanical barrier when entering indoor public places, as well as specific outdoor spaces such as open-air markets. The mechanical barrier can be a disposable or reusable mask, or another device, such as a shawl. Only two groups of people are exempt from this obligation: children under the age of six, and persons with a relevant medical condition, such as chronic respiratory disease or anxiety disorder.

From 6 April 2020 onwards, people had to wear facial protection when entering supermarkets, pharmacies, or any other premises open at the time. Since mid-April, people in Austria additionally have to wear facial protection when using public transportation, or when sharing a car ride with people living in a different household. More detailed rules apply for educational institutions, public administration offices, and courts. In restaurants, cafés, and bars, which are allowed to reopen mid-May, customers have to wear facial protection when entering and leaving the premise, but not while being seated. Those who break these rules are liable to pay a 25 Euros fine.

At the time the first bylaw on the use of facial protection came into effect, supermarkets were instructed to make disposable masks available to their customers. While some supermarkets have been offering masks for free, others are charging customers who have not brought their own facial protection. Some weeks into the rule, we have been seeing a wide range of facial coverings, including people wearing reusable masks made of cotton, or makeshift visors made

of plastic. Many people have started to make their own masks, or make them for friends and family.

Compliance with the rule is mixed. In supermarkets and other shops, it is rare to spot people without a face mask; they would be reprimanded by the salesclerks or other customers. In public transportation, where the use of a face mask is obligatory as well, compliance is more patchy. People wear facial covers on the platform and when entering trains or trams but take them off once inside, or let them dangle from their chins when making phone calls or sipping a drink.

As for ourselves, one of us often wears a mask upon leaving her apartment (even though she is not required by law to do so), and other times only when entering indoor public places. While she takes care to follow the rules about face masks in public, she does not wash her cotton mask regularly or change her disposable masks as often as recommended by guidelines. For her, unlike other measures to contain the spread of the virus, the wearing of masks is predominantly a symbol of social cohesion and complying with the rules and not so much a measure to effectively protect herself and others from infection. The few times she saw someone without a mask entering a supermarket or the metro, her first thoughts were about social deviance and the arrogance of ignoring a commonly agreed-upon practice, and not about the risk of infection. Remembering that people can have very good reasons not to wear a mask, she tried to change her attitude. Her engagements with others who also wear facial protection she associates with mutual understanding and benevolence. But she also finds such encounters uncanny, as they seem to be acts of mutual reassurance of being good citizens, which inevitably entails the rejection and stigmatisation of those not following the rules.

The other author's use of face coverings is very similar, except that she uses a washable smog mask that people use to jog in Hong Kong that someone gave her as a gift. She uses that mask only and washes it regularly. She does not wear it when walking in the street but whenever she enters public places.