Layers of Protection, Explained
April 22, 2022

This document was prepared on April 22, 2022 by Natalie Garrison. Natalie works for North Yorkers for Disabled Persons as an Outreach Communication Facilitator, Information Referral and Resources Support. She can be reached at natalie.nydp@gmail.com.

—

Ever since the provincial government announced that they will be lifting COVID-19 restrictions, especially mandatory mask-wearing, the term "layers of protection" has been used a lot. But what does it mean? This article will explain both the term and the metaphor that is often used to illustrate it.

Everything that we do to protect ourselves from getting infected with COVID-19 is a layer of protection. Each of these actions can also be considered a layer of protection:

- getting two COVID-19 vaccines and booster shots
- wearing a mask
- physical distancing (staying 6 feet or 2 metres away from others)
- avoiding crowded areas, and
- washing your hands.

When people say that wearing a mask is just one layer of protection, what they mean is that it is just one way, but not the *only* way, to protect yourself from COVID-19. All of these actions help lower our chances of catching it, but what provides us with the most protection is getting fully vaccinated and getting the two booster shots as soon as you can.

The Swiss Cheese Metaphor

This is a visual way to think about layers of protection. Imagine that you are trying to shelter yourself from a breeze of airborne air particles that contain COVID-19. All you have to protect yourself are giant pieces of Swiss cheese in front of you. In this metaphor, every layer of protection is one piece of Swiss cheese.

One piece of Swiss cheese would not be very effective protection from the breeze because it has so many holes in it. In a similar way, if you only wear a mask, it's like standing behind just one piece of Swiss cheese. You are not very well protected from COVID-19.

But every slice of Swiss cheese has holes in different places, so if you layer multiple pieces of cheese behind each other, some holes will be covered. More layers of cheese means more holes will be covered, and the chance that the breeze can reach you will be lower than if the cheese were not there.

An illustration of this metaphor is on the next page.
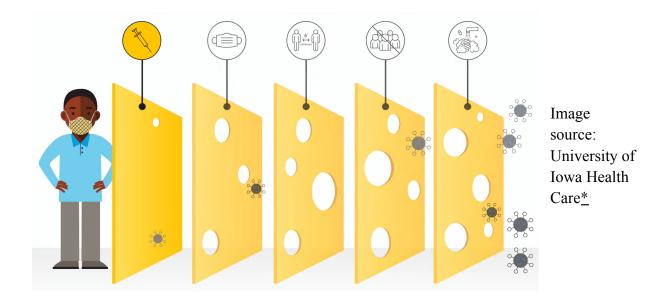
Image source: University of Iowa Health Care*

Image Description: A Black man is wearing a yellow face mask, and his hands are on his hips. He is standing behind five giant pieces of Swiss cheese. The first piece of cheese is labelled "handwashing." Behind it, the next piece of cheese is "avoiding crowds." The third piece of cheese is "physical distancing", and the fourth piece of cheese is "wearing a mask." The fifth and final slice of cheese is getting two vaccines and your booster shots.

Notice that this final piece of cheese does have a hole, but it does not have as many holes as the other slices. This metaphor also illustrates the point that immunization is the strongest layer of protection.

Remember that none of these layers of protection are enough by themselves. For instance, you can still get COVID-19 if you're fully vaccinated and boosted, but you don't wear a mask at a crowded event.

The more layers of protection that you choose to follow, the less you risk getting sick.

—

If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675