

Sanitation Workers To Garbage Collectors: How These Heroes Face Covid-19 Risk & How We Can Help

Bobins Abraham Updated: Mar 26, 2020, 10:22 IST

Over the past few weeks, we have been flooded with all kinds of precautionary measures including frequent hand washes, use of hand sanitizers, wearing face masks, social distancing, stay at home and much more to reduce the chances of contracting the coronavirus infection.

While most of us can afford at least a few of these measures, everyone around us is not that privileged. Even now, a lot of them have been exposed to the risk of contracting the virus, because of our carelessness.



One section of the society that is under considerable risk is the municipality workers who go home to home collecting the waste materials. The used gloves, masks, sanitizer bottles that we discard in the same garbage bin as other household waste every day puts the garbage collectors who have no protection whatsoever at a high risk of infections.

According to experts, the first thing we can do to help them is to ensure the segregation of waste at source.

"In addition, to following the guidelines issued by leading health bodies, we must also dispose of our gloves, masks, sanitizer bottles, tissue papers responsibly so these items are collected and treated/recycled to contain the infection. While, the recycling ecosystem doesn't exist for gloves/masks but small sanitizer bottles which is PET plastic, is one of the highest recycled plastic globally and must be disposed of properly to ensure recycling. Infection can come from anywhere, reusable items such as cups, glasses should be avoided at restaurants/public places and single-use plastics which are highly recycled in India should be preferred for the time being," Prof. GD Yadav, Padma Shri awarded Scientist and Retired Vice-Chancellor of Institute of Chemical Technology(ICT) said.



Experts also urged the government to supply safety kits which contain gloves, masks, hand wash/sanitizer bottles to all municipal workers and ragpickers, since they manually handle household waste regularly.

“There should be no handling of garbage with bare hands. Municipal workers, waste pickers need gloves. The general public should also ensure that they segregate waste at source, reducing the need for municipal workers to touch and separate waste manually, which would expose them to infections. Scientifically, gloves/masks should be incinerated post usages but since it can't be practiced at every household hence there should be a different garbage bag to dispose of household biomedical waste such as used tissues, gloves, etc. especially during the current outbreak," Dr. V Ramasubramanian, Infectious Diseases Expert, Apollo Hospitals said.



Common citizens are advised to dispose of their garbage in three categories – Biomedical waste (tissues, masks, gloves, sanitizer bottles), recyclables (metal cans, all size PET/HDPE plastic bottles and other heavy plastic objects, cardboards) and compostable (food and other organic waste).

The Indian government is providing masks, sanitizer/hand wash bottles and plastic water bottles to the people who have been quarantined in various parts of our country.

Experts from across the globe are demanding to provide safety equipment to local workers, allow easily disposable but highly recycled items such as plastic bottles for drinking water and temporary ban reusable items at municipal/government offices to contain the COVID19 outbreak.



“The society’s perception and practice of indiscriminate disposal of various items can be a potential source of infection of COVID to municipal workers. The communities need to dispose of their used napkins, tissues, empty sanitizer bottles in a separate bag, to ensure the safety of municipal workers and ragpickers. It will also ensure that the cycle of garbage collection and plastic recycling don’t get affected. The government should also provide safety kits to municipal workers urgently and educate them on how to handle household waste during the outbreak, to help in halting the chain of transmission,” **Dr. Deepak Saxena**, Medical Expert on Public Health and Professor, **Indian Institute of Public Health** said.

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