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# Young people hide behind flu masks

BY CHIKA AKIYAMA STAFF WRITER

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Kana, 14, poses for photos with a friend while wearing a flu mask. Her friend has obscured her own face using the "decoration" functions of the photo-sticker machine. (Chika Akiyama)

The 15-year-old high school student pulled down his flu mask to sip at his coffee and immediately set it back on his face.

"I remove it completely only when I eat, take a bath or sleep," he said. "I take it off when I have to

run in my PE class, but pull it out of a pocket and put it back on when I get my breath."

Throughout an interview at a family restaurant in Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture, the youth, who did not have a cold or flu, repeatedly touched his mask to make sure it was in place.

He is an example of a phenomenon identified by Yohei Harada, an analyst with ad agency Hakuodo Inc., who researches Japanese youth trends.

He says the disposable masks, which are widely worn in Japan by people with colds or flu and also to protect from infection or hay fever, are being worn almost permanently by some youngsters for a completely different reason: to hide their faces.



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「朝シャキッと起きる、セサミンを飲む。パワーをもらっています。年だからだと思わず、やれることはやろうよ、そう思います。」  
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もう無理できるほど若くないんだと  
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The boy interviewed in Takasaki initially began to wear his mask in the pollen allergy season when he was in the second year of junior high school. He came to wear it all the time, except for the height of summer.

"All I can say is it somehow calms me down," the boy said.

Three of his friends, who go to different schools, also wear masks. They often get together. The only time they see one another's faces is when they go singing in a karaoke parlor, he said.

His parents and teachers "say nothing. They seem to feel it's OK." His mother even helps him keep stocks of the masks, which he changes daily.

The boy talked a lot about girls during the interview, but said he seldom talked with them. When he and his masked friends go to the beach, he said, they keep to themselves.

"It's much more fun to have a good time as a group of boys than to spend a whole day trying to pick up girls," he said.

"When I am scolded by a teacher, I can just let it pass or I can be disobedient if I am wearing a mask," the boy said. "But, if not, it hurts."

Mitsuru, an 18-year-old who is training as a fashion model in Tokyo, said he also "wears a mask at high school all day long."

"I feel at ease. I can concentrate, so I make good progress in my studies," he said.

He doesn't like the smell of the masks, so he always keeps a candy in his mouth to help counteract it.

Kana, a 14-year-old junior high school student in Shiga Prefecture, said she wears one for cosmetic reasons.

"I have inferiority complex about my looks," Kana said.

She doesn't like her small eyes, and thinks that "if I hide my nose and below, then the smallness of my eyes will not stand out."

Kana buys masks decorated with popular cartoon characters and wears them at school.

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She said covering her face is not seen as particularly odd by her friends. In fact, she said, other girls quite commonly use the "decoration" functions of photo-sticker machines to artificially obscure their mouths in photographs and put emphasis on their eyes.

A high-school girl who always wears a mask said: "I can live without it, but it gives me a sense of security because it conceals my face, and I am not exposed to other people's eyes."

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