Doing the laundry at 60C should keep clothes clear

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

The virus doesn’t survive well on clothes and if it does washing them at 60C should destroy it, scientists say. Studies have shown the virus can remain active on metal and plastic surfaces for as long as three days, which could include buttons and zips, but scientists doubt that contaminated fabrics are a significant source of infection.

“The virus is not a living organism, but a tiny opportunistic particle. It doesn’t grow in the environment, it merely tries to survive long enough until it reaches a human mucosal surface [such as those in the eyes, mouth or nose] where it is activated,” Brendan Wren, professor of microbial pathogenesis at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said.

These particles “degrade readily”, he added. “For example, they don’t survive at temperatures over 50C, or in detergents or alcohol. It doesn’t survive well on cloth fibres — but there is no harm in washing clothes more frequently.”

Ian Jones, professor of virology at Reading University, said: “The virus is inactivated by desiccation and by detergent, as well as by heat, so aerosol droplets that land on clothes will become inactivated quite soon anyway.”

The focus should be reducing the particles spread from the mouths and noses of infected individuals, he added. “Spain is also advising wearing masks as people return to work, which seems a much more direct approach to minimising transmission onto surfaces such as clothes or directly, person to person,” Professor Jones said.

Researchers found that the virus can survive on cardboard for up to a day and in fine droplets in air for at least three hours. It survived least well on copper surfaces, lasting for about four hours.

Researchers at the US National Institutes of Health said: “Our results indicate that aerosol and fomite transmission [passing on via inanimate objects] is plausible, as the virus can remain viable in aerosols for multiple hours and on surfaces up to days.”

Spain’s health ministry issued guidelines for workers allowed to return to some jobs this week. They recommended washing work clothes at between 60ºC and 90ºC and wearing facemasks while working with others.