

Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19): Mask Guidance

This guidance presents up-to-date information regarding the use of face masks to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Mask basics:

Masks are a powerful tool for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

- Masks act as a simple barrier to help prevent respiratory droplets from traveling into the air and onto other people when the person wearing the mask talks, coughs, sneezes, or raises their voice. This is called source control. Masks also provide some protection to the mask wearer against droplets expelled by other people.
- Masks help prevent symptomatic as well as asymptomatic spread of COVID-19.
- Masks do not cause people to breathe in higher levels of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Carbon dioxide is produced when people breathe out. It does not build up behind your mask because:
 - Masks do not have an airtight seal around your face, and
 - CO₂ is a small molecule that is able to pass out through your mask into the air.

Mask rules and recommendations:

UPDATE: The DC indoor mask mandate is reinstated effective December 21, 2021, per Mayor's Order 2021-147.

Everyone (including fully vaccinated people¹) must wear masks:

- **in indoor public settings.**
 - This includes any business or establishment open to members of the public (including but not limited to: grocery stores, restaurants and bars, gyms, office buildings, libraries, retail establishments, indoor sports and entertainment venues, childcare facilities, schools, institutions of higher education, congregate facilities (e.g., correctional facilities, homeless shelters), healthcare facilities, houses of worship, and common areas of apartment or condominium complexes).
 - **This does not include indoor gatherings at private residences.**
- Masks must also be worn on public transportation traveling into, within, or out of the United States (on an airplane, train, bus, taxi, ride-share vehicle, or at a transportation hub such as an airport or train station).
- **A mask is not required during the following activities/situations when a person is:**
 - actively eating or drinking
 - actively playing organized indoor sports
 - in the water at a swimming pool or aquatic facility
 - alone in an enclosed office
 - performing (e.g., singing, dancing, acting, playing an instrument) as long as performers maintain 6 feet of distance from any audience members ²
 - giving a speech for broadcast or an audience, provided that no one is within 6 feet of the speaker
 - teaching a large college or university class with auditorium-style seating, provided

¹ A person is considered **fully vaccinated** 14 days after they complete a **primary** COVID-19 vaccine series (after the second dose of a 2-dose series, or after one dose of a single-dose vaccine). The **primary series** is the standard vaccine course before any extra (e.g., booster) doses.

² This exception does **not** apply in School settings (Pre-Kindergarten – 12th Grade and Adult Education)

- that no one is within 6 feet of the instructor
- speaking to or translating for a deaf or hard of hearing person
- in outdoor areas of a transportation conveyance (such as the open deck of a ferry, or the open-air upper deck of a double-decker bus.)
- required to use equipment for a job that precludes the wearing of a mask and the person is wearing or using that equipment, or when wearing a mask would endanger public safety
- lawfully asked to remove their mask for facial recognition purposes
- Landlords and their agents (maintenance personnel, etc.) **must** wear a mask when performing services or doing business in a private residence.

Fully vaccinated people:

- Outdoor activities:
 - It is generally safe for fully vaccinated people to participate in outdoor activities without masks or social distancing.
 - Fully vaccinated people may choose to wear a mask in **crowded outdoor settings** if they or someone in their household is immunocompromised³ or unvaccinated/not fully vaccinated.
 - Fully vaccinated people may also choose to wear a mask during outdoor activities if they are in an area with low vaccination rates and **substantial to high** COVID-19 rates⁴.
- If a fully vaccinated person has a **close contact exposure** to a person with confirmed COVID-19, If anyone in their household is immunocompromised or unvaccinated/not fully vaccinated (including children younger than 5), fully vaccinated people may also choose to wear a mask at home for 14 days or until they have a negative COVID-19 test⁵.
- **NOTE:** Immunocompromised people who are fully vaccinated may not be fully protected by the vaccine and should follow guidance for people who are not fully vaccinated (see next section),
- For more information for fully vaccinated people, see *Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

People who are not fully vaccinated or who are immunocompromised:

- Get vaccinated! Find out more about the COVID-19 vaccine at coronavirus.dc.gov/vaccine.
- People who are not fully vaccinated (including children younger than 5) are at higher risk for catching COVID-19 and spreading it within their communities.
- There are some activities that unvaccinated people can participate in without masks at relatively low risk to themselves and others, such as:
 - casual outdoor activities with members of their own household (e.g., biking, running, walking)
 - attending a small outdoor gathering with friends and/or family who are fully vaccinated
 - visiting indoors with fully vaccinated people from one household
- People who are not fully vaccinated and immunocompromised people should continue to follow everyday prevention measures like social distancing, avoiding crowds, and avoiding

³ **Immunocompromised** means having a weakened immune system due to a medical condition or from taking medications that suppress the immune system. This includes, but is not limited to: people on chemotherapy, people with blood cancers like leukemia, people who have had an organ transplant or stem cell transplant, and people on dialysis.

⁴ To look up current levels of community transmission (and other data including local vaccination rates) for DC and other areas of the country, see the *CDC Data Tracker* at covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view

⁵ For more information about what to do if you are exposed to COVID-19 (for fully vaccinated as well as unvaccinated people), see *Guidance for Close Contacts of a Person Confirmed to have COVID-19: Quarantine and Testing* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

poorly ventilated indoor spaces.

- For more information, see *Guidance for People who are not Fully Vaccinated or Immunocompromised* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

Who should not wear a mask:

- Children younger than age 2
- Anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove a mask without assistance.
- Mask adaptations and alterations can be considered in some situations, for example:
 - Small children may have difficulty wearing a mask properly for an extended period of time. In these circumstances, wearing a mask could be prioritized for times where social distancing is more difficult (e.g., when standing in line at school, carpool pickup and drop-off times).
 - Some people with medical conditions or disabilities, including mental health conditions, may have difficulties wearing a mask and should consult with their healthcare provider for advice.

Types of masks:

- **Medical-grade disposable face masks** (for example medical, surgical, or procedure masks): These masks meet strict quality, filtration, and splash resistance requirements. Medical grade face masks are regulated by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and come in 3 different protection levels rated by the ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials). Medical grade face masks will have the FDA seal of approval and ASTM protection level listed on the box.
- **Non-medical disposable masks**: These are masks that look similar to medical grade masks but are not intended for medical use. They vary widely in quality and are unregulated and will not have the FDA seal of approval nor ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials) protection level listed on the box.
- **Cloth masks**: (such as homemade cloth masks, store-bought fabric masks, etc.) These can generally be washed and reused.
- **Clear masks**: (or cloth masks with a clear plastic panel) An alternative mask for people who interact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, students learning to read, students learning a new language, or people with disabilities.
- **Respirators** (for example N95 or K95): These are specialized medical supplies and should not be purchased or used by members of the general public. They should be reserved for healthcare workers and other professionals whose job tasks require their use and have been trained to wear them properly.

Selecting masks:

- Disposable masks:
 - **Do**: select masks with built in wire at the nose for better fit
 - **Do not**: select masks with vents or exhalation valves. (This could allow virus particles to escape.)
- Cloth masks:
 - **Do**: choose cloth masks that are made with
 - two or more layers of washable, breathable fabric
 - fabric that blocks light when held up to a light source
 - **Do not**: select cloth masks that are made with:
 - material that is hard to breathe through such as leather or vinyl
 - loosely woven or knit fabric
- Neck gaiters: These can be acceptable mask alternatives. If worn, select one with two layers

- or fold it over to make two layers.
- The following are **not** acceptable mask alternatives:
 - Face shields
 - Scarves, ski masks and balaclavas (If worn, these should be worn over your mask.)
- **Children** should wear masks made for children.
- For people with beards: Beards may interfere with the fit of masks, but people with beards should still wear masks when they are needed. Consider using a mask fitter with your mask, or layering a cloth mask over a disposable mask.

How to correctly wear a mask

- Before putting on a mask, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water.
- Make sure your mask covers your nose and mouth completely.
- Adjust your mask so that it fits snugly against the sides of your face without gaps.
- For better fit:
 - Use a mask fitter or brace.
 - Knot ear loops of a mask and tuck in excess material. For instructions see, [youtube.com/watch?v=GzTAZDsNBe0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzTAZDsNBe0).
- Do not put your mask around your neck or up on your forehead.
- Avoid touching the mask while using it; if you do, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water.
 - If you need to adjust your mask frequently, it probably does not fit you well and you should get a different mask.
- Remove your mask and replace with another if it becomes visibly dirty, wet, or difficult to breathe through.
- To remove the mask:
 - Handle it by the string ties or ear loops only. Untie the strings behind your head or stretch the ear loops and remove. Avoid touching the front of the mask.
 - Fold outside corners together (so the inside part of the mask is folded into itself). Clean hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water immediately after removing the mask.

How to care for your mask

- If you need to temporarily remove your mask (e.g., when eating or drinking), keep it clean and protected for reuse in a clean, dry, breathable paper bag or mesh fabric bag. If you don't have a bag handy, keep your mask in your pocket or purse.
- Cloth masks can be machine-washed with your regular laundry, using the warmest appropriate water setting. Dry using the highest appropriate heat setting or hang to dry.
 - If you are away from home and your cloth mask becomes wet or soiled, store it in a clean sealed plastic bag until it can be washed. Wash soiled cloth masks as soon as possible so that they don't become moldy.
- Disposable masks cannot be washed. Discard a disposable mask after wearing it once, and whenever a mask becomes soiled (visibly dirty), damaged, or hard to breathe through.

The guidelines above will continue to be updated as the outbreak evolves. Please visit coronavirus.dc.gov for the most updated information.