

## Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19): Mask and Respirator Guidance

This guidance presents up-to-date information regarding the use of masks and respirators to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. This guidance is not intended for use in healthcare facilities, or non-healthcare congregate settings (Correctional Facilities and Detention Centers, Homeless Shelters). Guidance specific to masks, respirators, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) in these settings can be found at [coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance](https://coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance).

### **Mask overview and recommendations:**

#### **Overview:**

- Masks have and will continue to remain an important tool in preventing symptomatic as well as asymptomatic spread of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses. The main way these viruses spread is through droplets expelled from an infected person's nose or mouth when they talk, cough, sneeze, or raise their voice. Masks and respirators provide a barrier between the wearer and the environment. This is called source control.
- **While no longer required in most settings, everyone should respect the choice of others who wish to wear a mask or respirator even when not required.**
- **Any business, community establishment, or event organizer may still choose to require masks for patrons and employees at their facility.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- When traveling: All people, regardless of their vaccination status, should wear a mask or respirator in indoor areas of public transportation (e.g., airplanes, buses, trains) and transportation hubs (e.g., airports, bus or train stations, seaports).
- For indoor public settings without masking requirements: Everyone should wear a mask or respirator in indoor public places if the COVID-19 Community Level<sup>1</sup> is **HIGH**.
- People who are immunocompromised<sup>2</sup> or at high risk for severe COVID-19<sup>3</sup> (**including people 65 and older**) should wear a mask or respirator in indoor public places if the COVID-19 Community Level is **MEDIUM** or **HIGH**
- Outdoor activities: It is not necessary to wear masks outdoors.
- Indoor private settings (e.g., a home): If the COVID-19 Community Level is **MEDIUM** or **HIGH**, and you visit someone who is immunocompromised or at high risk for severe COVID-19, both of you should wear a mask or respirator when indoors together.
- **NOTE**: At any COVID-19 Community Level (even **LOW**) a person may choose to wear a mask or respirator based on personal preference and assessment of their own personal risk.

### **Masks and respirators:**

#### **Basics:**

- There are several varieties of masks and respirators which provide varying levels of protection to the wearer and to other people in the vicinity.
- Disposable procedure masks (aka surgical masks) are generally more protective than cloth masks.
- **Properly fitting respirators provide the highest levels of protection.**

<sup>1</sup> To look up the current COVID-19 Community Level for DC and other areas of the U.S., see [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html](https://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/covid-by-county.html).

<sup>2</sup> **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.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see *People with Certain Medical Conditions* at [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html](https://cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html).

- Respirators are a special type of filtering mask (e.g., KN95s, N95s) They provide high levels of protection to the **wearer** and also act as source control to protect others.
- Please note that more highly protective masks and respirators can be less comfortable to wear for prolonged periods of time. If this is the case, a mask that is less protective but can be worn consistently is preferable to a mask or respirator that is poorly tolerated and may be frequently removed. **Any mask is better than wearing no mask.**
  - **When wearing a mask, choose the most protective mask or respirator that you are able to wear consistently.**
  - Whichever product you choose should be well-fitting, with no gaps around the edges.

### Masks:

- Types of masks:
  - Cloth masks
  - Disposable procedure masks
  - Masks that meet a standard (includes cloth and disposable)
    - These are designed and tested to meet a certain performance standard and are specially labelled (e.g., “MEETS WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE”).
    - For more information, including lists of masks that meet these standards, see [cdc.gov/PPEInfo/RG/FaceCoverings](https://www.cdc.gov/PPEInfo/RG/FaceCoverings).
  - 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
- Tips for selecting masks:
  - Cloth masks:
    - Choose cloth masks that are layered and made with tightly woven fabric (i.e., fabric that blocks light when held up to a light source).
    - Avoid cloth masks made from:
      - loosely woven or knit fabric
      - material that is hard to breathe through such as leather or vinyl
  - Disposable masks:
    - Choose masks with built in wire at the nose for better fit.
    - Do not wear masks with vents or exhalation valves. (This could allow droplets to escape.)
- Beards may interfere with the fit and effectiveness of masks. Shaving your beard or trimming your beard close to your face is the best way to ensure a proper fit.
  - Consider using a mask fitter with your mask or layering a cloth mask over a disposable mask (the outer mask should push the edges of the inner mask against the face and beard.)
- The following are **not** acceptable mask alternatives:
  - Face shields
  - Scarves, ski masks and balaclavas (If worn, these should be worn *over* your mask.)

### Respirators:

- There are 2 types of widely available respirators:
  - NIOSH-approved<sup>5</sup> respirators (e.g., N95 respirators)
    - These are designed to a specific U.S. quality performance standard.
    - They filter at least 95% of particles when they have a good fit.
    - They have markings to show that they are authentic.
    - Respirators that are specifically labeled “surgical” N95 respirators should be reserved for healthcare workers. (These are designed to protect against additional hazards such as blood spatter.)

<sup>5</sup> NIOSH=National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

- For more information about selecting NIOSH-approved respirators, see [cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp\\_part/default.html](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html).
- For a list of pharmacies that provide free N95 masks, see [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/free-masks.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/free-masks.html).
- Employers who want to distribute N95 respirators to employees need to follow an Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) respiratory protection program. For more information, see [osha.gov/respiratory-protection](https://www.osha.gov/respiratory-protection).
- Respirators that meet international standards (e.g., KN95 respirators):
  - These are designed to standards that may not include a quality requirement.
  - For more information about selecting international respirators, see [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ppe-strategy/international-respirator-purchase.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ppe-strategy/international-respirator-purchase.html).

### Who should not wear a mask or respirator:

- Children younger than age 2
- Anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove a mask without assistance.
- **NOTE:** 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.

### Children and masks:

- **It is safe for children age 2 and older to wear masks.**
- Children should wear masks made for children.
- **Respirators:**
  - Respirators that meet international standards (e.g., KN95s) are available in children's sizes.
  - Smaller-sized NIOSH-approved respirators are available but be aware that respirators have generally been designed for workplace use by adults and have not been tested in children.

The guidelines above will continue to be updated as necessary. Please visit [coronavirus.dc.gov](https://coronavirus.dc.gov) for the most updated information.