

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. For information on masks, respirators, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) in healthcare facilities, see *Required Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Healthcare Facilities* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

Masks and respirators:

Basics:

- Masks and respirators are important tools to prevent symptomatic as well as asymptomatic spread of COVID-19. The main way COVID-19 spreads 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.
- 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.**
 - 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.**
- Whatever 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 masks are the most highly protective masks available.** They 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 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.)
- 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-approved¹ respirators (e.g., N95 respirators)
 - These are designed to a specific high-quality U.S. 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.)
 - 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).
 - 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 an International Standard (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).

Choosing what to wear:

- **DC Health recommends that people should wear the most protective mask or respirator that they are able to wear consistently, and that fits them well.**
- **It is particularly important to choose a more highly protective mask or respirator in the following higher-risk situations:**
 - **If you are:**
 - Not up to date with your COVID-19 vaccine
 - A person is considered **up to date** after they have received all recommended doses of COVID-19 vaccine, including booster doses as applicable. This includes:
 - ❖ Unboosted people 12 and older who completed their primary vaccine series²:
 - Less than 5 months ago (for the mRNA vaccines: Pfizer or Moderna)
 - Less than 2 months ago (for the J&J vaccine)
 - Children age 5 to 11 who have completed a primary vaccine series but are not yet eligible for a booster dose
 - At higher risk for severe COVID-19³ (including adults older than 65 and people

¹ NIOSH=National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

² The initial vaccine course before any extra (e.g., “booster”) doses

³ For more information, see *Guidance for People at Higher Risk for Severe COVID-19* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

- who are immunocompromised⁴)
- Taking care of someone with COVID-19
- Working at a job where you interact with large numbers of the public, especially if they are inconsistently masked (e.g., grocery store workers, bus drivers)
- On public transportation
- Travelling
- In crowded public settings where physical distancing is difficult

Mask rules and recommendations:

- **UPDATE:** The indoor mask mandate will expire on March 1, 2022. Look for updates to this guidance.
- **NOTE:** Any properly worn cloth mask, disposable mask, or respirator meets requirements for the indoor mask mandate.

Everyone (including people who are up to date⁵ on their COVID-19 vaccine) must wear a mask:

- **in indoor public settings (Per DC Mayor's Order 2021-147) through February 28, 2022**
 - 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, personal service establishments (e.g., barbershops and hair salons, wax salons, massage and health spas), childcare facilities, schools, institutions of higher education, congregate facilities (e.g., correctional facilities, homeless shelters), healthcare facilities, houses of worship, 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 sports⁶
 - 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 members⁷
 - 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 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.)

⁴ **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

⁵ See definition on page 2.

⁶ See special requirements for school settings (Pre-Kindergarten -12th Grade and Adult Education) in *Guidance for Schools at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.*

⁷ **This exception does not apply in School settings (Pre-Kindergarten – 12th Grade and Adult Education)**⁸ For information on the current level of community spread in DC, please visit covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view?list_select_state=District+of+Columbia&data-type=Risk&list_select_county=11001

- 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.

Mask recommendations:

- Outdoor activities: In general, people do not need to wear masks when outdoors. However, in areas with **substantial** to **high** COVID-19 transmission⁸, people may choose to wear a mask when they are in sustained close contact with other people, particularly if they are at higher risk for severe COVID-19³, or if someone in their household is immunocompromised, unvaccinated, or not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine.
- For people who are unvaccinated, not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine OR immunocompromised
 - People who are unvaccinated (including children younger than 5) or not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine are at higher risk for catching COVID-19 and spreading it within their communities.
 - Immunocompromised people who are up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine may not be fully protected by the vaccine and should follow recommendations for people who are unvaccinated.
 - There are some activities that these persons 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 up to date on their vaccines
 - visiting indoors with people from one household who are all up to date on their COVID-19 vaccines
 - These persons should continue to follow everyday prevention measures like social distancing, avoiding crowds, and avoiding poorly ventilated indoor spaces.

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.

Special topics:

Children and masks

- **It is safe for children age 2 and older to wear masks.**
- Children should wear masks made for children.

⁸ For information on the current level of community spread in DC, please visit covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#county-view?list_select_state=District+of+Columbia&data-type=Risk&list_select_county=11001

- **Respirators:** Smaller-sized respirators are available but be aware that respirators have generally been designed for workplace use by adults and have not been tested in children.

People with beards

- Beards may interfere with the fit and effectiveness of masks, but people with beards should still wear masks when indicated.
- Consider shaving your beard or trimming your beard close to your face.
- 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.)
- Masks designed for people with beards are being evaluated and more information will be provided as available.

How to correctly wear a mask or respirator

- Before putting on a mask/respirator, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water.
- Make sure your mask/respirator covers your nose and mouth completely.
- Do not put your mask/respirator around your neck or under your nose.
- Avoid touching a mask/respirator 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/respirator frequently, it probably does not fit you well and you should get a different one.
- Remove your mask/respirator and replace with another if it becomes visibly dirty, wet, or difficult to breathe through.
- **Masks (cloth or disposable):**
 - Adjust your mask so that it fits snugly against the sides of your face without gaps.
 - For better fit and extra protection:
 - Use a mask fitter or brace.
 - Wear 2 masks (disposable mask underneath and a cloth mask on top)
 - 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).
- To remove a mask/respirator:
 - Handle it by the string ties or ear loops only. Untie strings behind your head or stretch the ear loops and remove. Avoid touching the front of the mask/respirator.
 - **Masks:** 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 or respirator:

- If you need to temporarily remove your mask/respirator (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/respirator in your pocket or purse.
- **Masks:**
 - 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 and respirators cannot be washed. Discard a disposable mask or respirator after wearing it once.

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