

**Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19):
Mask Guidance for the General Public**

This guidance presents current best public health practices for wearing masks that the general public should follow 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 through your mask into the air.

Indoor mask mandate repealed:

- **DC Mayor's Order 2021-142, which took effect November 22, 2021, discontinued DC's mask mandate for indoor public spaces.**
 - **NOTE: The indoor mask mandate (regardless of vaccination status or personal history of COVID-19) remains in effect in the following settings:**
 - Health care facilities
 - Schools, including Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) ¹
 - Childcare facilities
 - Congregate settings (such as homeless shelters and correctional facilities)
 - Libraries
 - Public transit and ride share vehicles
 - It is not necessary for to wear masks in outdoor areas of a public transportation conveyance (such as the open deck of a ferry, or the open-air upper deck of a double-decker bus.)
 - **In any setting when required per workplace or establishment policies**
 - **NOTE: Businesses and community establishments may maintain stricter indoor masking policies for patrons and employees at their discretion.**
 - In these settings where the indoor mask mandate still applies, a mask is **not required** during the following activities/situations when a person is:
 - actively eating or drinking
 - in a private living space
 - in water (e.g., in a swimming pool, hot tub, showering)
 - alone in an enclosed office
 - giving a speech, 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

¹ Roommates in dormitories or other student or staff housing may be considered a household and do not need to wear masks within the household unit (e.g., dorm room or suite), unless someone is ill.

- 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

Mask recommendations:

- **Masks are no longer *required* in indoor public spaces. However, wearing a mask is still recommended in many situations.**
- As part of their COVID-19 mitigation plans, many businesses will still require masks to be worn indoors, even by fully vaccinated persons.
- Wearing a mask indoors when it is not required does not signal that the wearer is unvaccinated or is immunocompromised; the wearer may just be being careful.
- **Recommendations vary by a person's vaccination status:**

Fully vaccinated people²

- Fully vaccinated people are recommended to continue wearing masks in **indoor public settings** if community transmission levels are **substantial** or **high**.³
 - They may also choose to wear a mask in indoor public settings regardless of the level of community transmission if anyone in their household is immunocompromised⁴ or unvaccinated/not fully vaccinated (including children younger than 5).
- Fully vaccinated people can participate in outdoor activities safely 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 immunocompromised 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 rates³.
- Immunocompromised people who are fully vaccinated should follow guidance for people who are not fully vaccinated (see next section), because they may not be fully protected by the vaccine.
- If a fully vaccinated person has a **close contact exposure** to a person with confirmed COVID-19, they should wear a mask in indoor public settings for 14 days after their exposure, or until they have a negative COVID-19 test (performed 5 to 7 days after exposure).
 - 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 test.
 - 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.
- 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.

² 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.

³ 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

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.

- 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.
- They should continue to wear masks in indoor public spaces, especially if community transmission levels are **substantial** or **high**³.
- There are some activities that unvaccinated people can participate in without masks at 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 poorly ventilated indoor spaces.
- For more information for people who are not fully vaccinated, see *Guidance for People who are not Fully Vaccinated* 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.