

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

This guidance presents recommendations that the general public should follow for wearing face masks (or cloth face coverings) to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. This update is based on CDC (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) mask guidance updates published on 7/27/21.

The Delta variant currently poses a serious concern. It is much more contagious than the original strain of the COVID-19 virus and is spreading rapidly in the United States. The latest research shows that even fully vaccinated people can spread the Delta variant to others. The threat of the Delta variant makes it even more important for us all to do our part by following mask recommendations and getting vaccinated as soon as possible.

Mask basics:

Masks are a powerful tool for preventing the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. Masks act as a simple barrier to help prevent respiratory droplets from traveling into the air and to other people when the person wearing the mask talks, coughs, sneezes, or raises their voice. This is called source control. Wearing masks is important to prevent asymptomatic spread of the virus that causes COVID-19.

- Masks protect the wearer and protect other people. **Choosing not to wear a mask puts your own health as well as the health of others at risk (such as people who are immunocompromised and may not be fully protected from the vaccine, and people who are not yet eligible to get the vaccine like children under the age of 12).**
- To be effective, masks must be worn correctly. Masks should be 2-3 layers of tightly woven fabric, cover the nose and mouth, and fit snugly against the sides of the face.
- A mask is not a substitute for physical distancing.
- Mask wearing is especially important for people who are not fully vaccinated¹ or immunocompromised.²
- People who are immunocompromised may not be fully protected even if they are fully vaccinated. Because of this, immunocompromised people should follow the same masking recommendations as for unvaccinated people (see page 2).
- Take your shot! Find out more about the COVID-19 vaccine at coronavirus.dc.gov/vaccine.

Masking rules:

Everyone (including fully vaccinated people) must wear masks:

- **UPDATE:** 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 (when not eating or drinking), places of worship, gyms, office buildings, libraries, indoor entertainment venues, and common areas of apartment or condominium complexes).
 - **This does not include indoor gatherings at private residences.**

¹ A person is considered **fully vaccinated** 14 days after completion of a COVID-19 vaccination series (after the second dose of a 2-dose series, or after one dose of a single-dose vaccine).

² **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.

- In special settings such as: school, childcare, healthcare, correctional, and homeless shelter settings.
- When 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).
 - Note: It is not necessary for fully vaccinated people to wear masks 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.)
- When required to per workplace or establishment policies
- **A mask is not required during the following activities/situations when a person is:**
 - actively eating or drinking
 - actively playing indoor sports in a collegiate or professional sports setting
 - in the water at a swimming pool or aquatic facility
 - alone in an enclosed office that no one else is permitted to enter
 - giving a speech for broadcast or an audience, provided no one is within six feet of the speaker
 - performing (e.g., singing, dancing, acting, playing an instrument), as long as performers maintain 6 foot distance from any audience members
 - speaking to or translating for a deaf or hard of hearing person
 - 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

Fully vaccinated people

- **Outdoor activities:**
 - 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.
 - 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 rates.
- For more information for fully vaccinated people, see *Guidance for Fully Vaccinated People* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

Unvaccinated people³

People who are unvaccinated (including children 11 and under) 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 low risk to themselves. Unvaccinated people may do the following activities without masks:
 - casual outdoor activities with members of your 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

³ Partially vaccinated people and immunocompromised people should follow the same masking rules as for unvaccinated people

- 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.

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.
- Wearing a mask may not be possible in every situation. 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 face coverings:

- **Cloth face coverings:** (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, students learning to read, students learning a new language, or people with disabilities.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Masks with exhalation valves** or vents should not be worn to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- **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.

How to select a mask

It is important to select a mask that meets certain standards to ensure it is being effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19. Not all masks that are available provide this protection, so it is important to review details about a mask before wearing.

- When selecting a cloth face covering, it is recommended to choose one that is made with:
 - tightly woven fabrics, such as cotton and cotton blends, that does not let light pass through when held up to a light source;

- 2-3 fabric layers;
- or inner filter pockets.
- Do not select a mask/cloth face covering that is made with:
 - material that is hard to breathe through such as plastic or leather
 - loosely woven or knit fabrics
 - one layer
 - exhalation valves.
- A face shield is not an acceptable alternative for wearing a mask.
- Scarves, ski masks and balaclavas are not acceptable substitutes for masks and if worn should be worn over your mask.
- If you wear glasses, find a mask that fits closely over your nose or one that has a nose wire to limit fogging.
- Wearing multiple masks may cause masks to not fit properly. It is more important to wear a mask that has the recommended number of layers and good fit.

How to correctly wear a mask

- Before putting on a mask, clean your hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer or soap and water.
- Adjust your mask so that it covers your nose and mouth and fits snugly against the sides of your face.
- 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.
- 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 outside part 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

- Cloth face coverings can be machine-washed with your regular laundry, using the warmest appropriate water setting and drying it using the highest heat setting.
- Instructions for washing a cloth face covering by hand is available on the CDC website: [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wash-cloth-face-coverings.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wash-cloth-face-coverings.html).
- Face masks cannot be washed. Discard a mask when it 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.