

Mask Use & COVID-19

Recommendations Regarding Mask Use (May 26, 2020)

- **Reason for Social Distancing and Masks**

COVID-19 is transmitted primarily by respiratory droplets produced when exhaling, coughing, or sneezing; therefore, guidance is to maintain a 6-foot distance from others. If you are unable to keep this distance, especially for more than a few minutes consecutively, various forms of facial coverings are recommended to prevent your respiratory droplets from spreading to someone else who is within close proximity. Wearing a mask also helps to remind many people not to touch their faces unless they have just recently washed their hands.

- **Importance of Masks**

Wearing a face covering is particularly important where maintaining social distancing is difficult. The most current COVID-19 information indicates many people with the infection show minimal or no symptoms. It also is thought that an infected person may be contagious for up to 48 hours before they exhibit symptoms. The CDC always has recommended masking of infected people to prevent spread of the virus. Now that we know many individuals infected with COVID-19 have no symptoms, the use of masks or facial coverings is recommended for everyone who cannot maintain social distancing. It also has become required by some states when in public, which would include while at work.

- **Use of Specialized or Cloth Masks**

In settings that do not require a specialized type of mask (e.g. N95 or medical grade masks), cloth masks are recommended to help protect co-workers. As specialized masks, such as N95s and medical-grade masks, continue to pose supply challenges, recommendations continue to prioritize these mask types for health care workers, first responders, and those who work in environments where respiratory secretions may be aerosolized.

Types of Available Masks and Appropriate Care

- **Respirator Masks**

N95 masks – or equivalents such as KN95s – are actual respirators that filter the air inhaled by the user. The user must be properly fit tested to the style being used. Because styles and fits vary by manufacturer, users must be refitted if they must use a different style of N95. The user also must be trained on proper use, including performing user seal-checks prior to each use. It is also necessary to retrain users on performing field seal-checks as the technique may also vary with different styles. Respirator masks commonly are used in industry for protection against hazardous airborne particulates. Additionally, they are used in health care for protection while performing certain procedures that produce aerosolized respiratory secretions that may contain pathogens like COVID-19. These masks are considered "disposable," but due to the current shortage, some workers are wearing the same N95 for multiple days when not damaged.

- **Surgical Masks**

Unlike respirators, surgical types of masks do not require fit testing; however, you should know how to wear and store them properly for extended use throughout the day. They can be worn for up to several days if they do not become damaged. While not being worn, surgical masks should be stored in a clean, dry paper bag. Surgical masks also provide a physical barrier to body fluid sprays or splashes, which includes protecting the wearer from large respiratory droplets/secretions; however, they are not designed to filter the air that may contain the smaller, aerosolized respiratory secretions.

- **Cloth Masks**

Cloth masks, like surgical masks, act as a physical barrier and are not intended to filter inhaled air as a respirator is designed to do. They, too, protect against direct contact with large respiratory droplets in sprays or splashes, but they easily become wet when exposed to moisture. Unlike surgical masks, they usually do not have any water resistance properties. Any constructed facial covering must be made of material that is breathable, so as to not obstruct the user's ability to breathe in or out. Cloth masks should be washed regularly – at least daily – or if visibly dirty or wet. Wash with a bleach-based detergent in hot water and machine dry on high heat. It is recommended to iron immediately to help retain the shape of the mask.

Purchasing Masks and Source Considerations

- **Purchasing**

At this point, purchasing of masks is handled on a first-come, first-served basis. While supply availability continues to improve, most businesses are purchasing whatever available masks they can, when they can. Sources and availability are continuously changing, so we cannot specify a vendor or group of vendors to use. We do recommend your supply chain team consider this as a priority project and purchase activity.

- **Source Considerations**

When purchasing masks from another country, be cautious about fraudulent merchandise that is being sold, especially on the internet. Try not to make large purchases without first inspecting the product if possible. When purchasing a respirator approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), you can be confident it will provide expected levels of protection. Due to shortages, the CDC and FDA have identified other options that also can protect workers. Because of an unprecedented number of poor-performing products on the market, we recommend reviewing information provided by the CDC on [considerations prior to purchase of masks](#) and [identification of counterfeit masks](#).

Mask-Use Guidelines for Employer Consideration

- **State Requirements**

States are employing various guidelines and requirements for mask usage in the workplace. We recommend you first understand your state's requirements and exceptions in determining how you will address masks in your environment. *Please note that exceptions are just as important as requirements for appropriate policy development.* Exceptions also promote the need to ensure other mitigating strategies are in place such as social distancing, physical barriers, work-from-home rules, and hygiene practices.

- **Key Considerations for Guidelines or Policies**

When developing guidelines or policies related to the requirement of mask usage in the workplace, **employers in industry** should continue to follow all pre-COVID-19 practices and requirements to protect employees where hazardous airborne particulates are present and a risk to the worker. For **health care and first responder situations**, respirators should be prioritized for procedures likely to generate respiratory aerosols. Otherwise, surgical masks should be used to protect against splashes or sprays and when prolonged face-to-face or close contact activities are unavoidable.

- **Behavioral Health Needs and Concerns Associated with Wearing Masks**

Some employees might have behavioral health issues that make it difficult and even traumatic for them to wear masks, which can present a challenge for employers. People that have diagnoses on the autism spectrum and other issues can be agitated by sensory stimulation such as the feel of certain types of clothing, smells, noises etc. For these employees, having something on their faces, experiencing the heat it creates and/or continuing to feel the mask even after they take it off, may make it next to impossible for them to manage wearing the masks. Some people also might have been traumatized in the past through abuse or assault in which their breathing was restricted. Wearing a mask can cause people to relive these traumatic events.

Employers might want to consider what options they have available to support these employees. Human Resources can address these difficulties through the organization's FMLA and/or ADAAA process and then evaluate the options for each employee. Some questions to consider:

- Does the organization have any options available for these team members?
- Can this employee work from home?
- Are there opportunities for the employee to work in an area where they can be alone?
- How does the organization manage these employees if there are no options for them?

It might be helpful to consult with legal counsel to assess how decisions for these employees fit with state requirements related to mask use in the workplace.

Additional Questions Asked by Employers

- **What recommendations are available to prevent steaming of eye protection from wearing masks?**

Below are several things to try that might help to prevent your warm breath from fogging up your glasses:

- Use antifogging wipes and sprays sold for lenses.
- Make sure the top of your mask fits as tightly as possible over your nose and under your eyes. Crimp it tightly if it has a bendable component over the nose. Some people have found using a nose clip over the mask also helps.
- Place a folded strip of facial tissue under the mask at the very top. It will help capture some of the moisture of your breath that causes the fogging.
- Wash glasses with soapy water, shake off excess with minimal rinsing and let them air dry – a technique first recommended for surgeons. The residual soap film prevents the lenses from fogging.

- **Are there recommendations for managing the effects of heat, humidity, and additional clothing or face shields?**

Everyone needs to acclimate to the heat when the temperatures rise. When temperatures fluctuate, you might need to re-acclimate if there is a prolonged cooler period or if you mainly work inside. A healthy person should experience no problem with the ability to breathe while wearing a simple facial covering or face mask. If you are fit enough to do your work without a face mask, you should be fine to work while wearing one. However, people with severe lung problems, such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorder (COPD) or asthma may not be able to wear a mask. Most people expressing difficulty wearing a mask are for reasons similar to claustrophobia or other psychological reasons that make it difficult to tolerate the mask. Anyone having difficulty wearing a mask should talk to their doctor about their concerns.

- **Is it normal for breathing to seem more difficult after wearing a mask all day?**

Sometimes this is caused by the face mask getting wet from moisture or sweat, which will make breathing difficult. The disposable masks should be changed when they get wet or become hard to breathe through. If possible, periodically take a break and go to a safe area where you can take your mask off and breathe freely for a few minutes. If this does not help and you continue to have breathing problems, you should discuss this with your doctor. Also, don't forget to hydrate periodically throughout the day.

- **Is there a single source to provide the latest health COVID updates?**

We recommend the [CDC COVID-19 website](#) as the best primary source for COVID-19 information and the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration COVID-19 website](#) for industry specific information; however, you also need to know your state and local health departments' requirements.

How to Safely Wear and Take Off a Cloth Face Covering

Accessible: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>

WEAR YOUR FACE COVERING CORRECTLY

- Wash your hands before putting on your face covering
- Put it over your nose and mouth and secure it under your chin
- Try to fit it snugly against the sides of your face
- Make sure you can breathe easily
- Do not place a mask on a child younger than 2



USE THE FACE COVERING TO PROTECT OTHERS

- Wear a face covering to protect others in case you're infected but don't have symptoms
- Keep the covering on your face the entire time you're in public
- Don't put the covering around your neck or up on your forehead
- Don't touch the face covering, and, if you do, clean your hands

FOLLOW EVERYDAY HEALTH HABITS

- Stay at least 6 feet away from others
- Avoid contact with people who are sick
- Wash your hands often, with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds each time
- Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available



TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTH FACE COVERING CAREFULLY, WHEN YOU'RE HOME

- Untie the strings behind your head or stretch the ear loops
- Handle only by the ear loops or ties
- Fold outside corners together
- Place covering in the washing machine
- Wash your hands with soap and water



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Cloth face coverings are not surgical masks or N-95 respirators, both of which should be saved for health care workers and other medical first responders.

For instructions on making a cloth face covering, see:

[cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)

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