

FACEMASK USE GUIDANCE FOR COVID-19

Facemasks can help protect others by containing respiratory droplets and airborne particles when the wearer coughs, sneezes or speaks, even when the individual wearing the mask is infectious but not showing symptoms (asymptomatic).

Although many facemasks are primarily intended to reduce the exhalation of infected particles by the wearer, facemasks can also help reduce inhalation of particles when they are used correctly, consistently, and modifications are applied to improve the mask's fit.

Wearing a face covering does *not* replace the need to practice other COVID-19 prevention measures described in the [University's COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#).

The information in this document is intended for use in non-healthcare settings at the University of Washington. UW Medicine medical facility personnel follow UW Medicine policies.

Topics covered in this document:

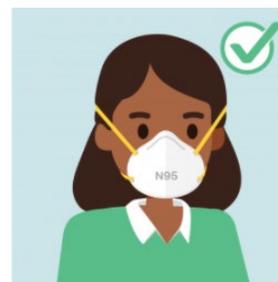
WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FACEMASKS?	2
WHEN SHOULD I WEAR AN N95, KN95 OR KF94 RESPIRATOR?	3
WHEN SHOULD I WEAR A MEDICAL/SURGICAL MASK?	3
How can I improve my medical/surgical mask's protection?	3
WHEN SHOULD I WEAR A CLOTH FACE COVERING?	4
How can I improve my cloth face covering's protection?	4
How should a cloth face covering be worn and cleaned?	5
HOW DO I SAFELY PUT ON, WEAR AND REMOVE A FACEMASK?	6
WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?	7



WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FACEMASKS?

There are three main types of facemasks:

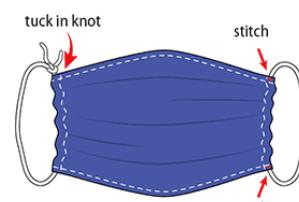
1. **Respirators**, such as N95, KN95 and KF94, are disposable facemasks.
 - a. Must meet strict quality standards and require approval by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) or other recognized international standards.
 - b. Provide the highest level of protection
 - c. N95 respirators require [fit testing](#) prior to use when **required** for a specific job activity that poses a high risk based on a [risk assessment](#).
2. **Surgical/medical procedure masks** are designed to be disposable.
 - a. Must meet American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) quality standard and approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for medical devices
 - b. Provide a higher level of protection than a cloth face covering
 - c. Used in healthcare settings for splash/spray control; also used in non-healthcare settings when a [risk assessment](#) indicates it is needed.
3. **Cloth face coverings** are reusable facemasks that have at least two layers of material.
 - a. Provide the lowest level of protection
 - b. Best for [low risk](#), less crowded, and/or outdoor settings
 - c. Some cloth face coverings meet the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) [performance standards for facemasks](#), [ASTM Specification for Barrier Face Coverings, F3502-21](#) and NIOSH Workplace Performance criteria. Face coverings that meet these standards are preferred for use in the workplace.



Respirator, Source: cdc.gov



Surgical/medical procedure mask, Source: cdc.gov



Cloth face covering. Source: cdc.gov

Choose a facemask that provides a level of protection appropriate for your work activities and environment based on a [risk assessment](#). Consider upgrading to a mask that provides a higher level of protection during times of high COVID-19 transmission.

For more information on the differences between facemasks, review the [Face Coverings, Mask and Respirators PDF](#) or [Understanding the difference between surgical masks and N95 respirators](#).

For information about the effectiveness of each type of facemask, refer to the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists [COVID-19 Fact Sheet](#).

WHEN SHOULD I WEAR AN N95, KN95 OR KF94 RESPIRATOR?

Voluntarily wearing an N95, KN95, or KF94 respirator can help protect you from COVID-19, especially when transmission rates are high in our communities.

Scenarios where you may need increased protection from a **N95, KN95 and KF94 respirator facemask** can include:

- You are unvaccinated and in close contact with others outside your household on a regular basis
- When COVID-19 community transmission rates are high
- Being in a crowded indoor setting
- Working in a poorly ventilated space
- Riding on public transportation (especially when you can't keep a distance from others)
- Working at a job where you interact with large numbers of people
- If you are at increased risk for severe illness
- When a [risk assessment](#) indicates it is needed

UW employees who are *not* required to wear a respirator can voluntarily wear a filtering facepiece respirator, such as an N95 or KN95, for their personal use in the workplace. UW employees voluntarily wearing a respirator in the workplace when it is not required must be provided with [Advisory Information for Employees who Voluntarily Use Respirators](#), regardless of whether the respirator is provided by the University or acquired by other means.

University personnel who are *required* to wear a respirator due to job hazards and regulatory requirements, and personnel who voluntarily wear elastomeric (tight fitting half-face or full-face cartridge type) respirators must be medically cleared, trained, and fit tested per the state requirements and UW EH&S [Respiratory Protection Program](#).

An N95, KN95, or KF94 respirator:

- Should *not* be layered with other masks when worn voluntarily outside of healthcare settings. Non-FDA approved N95s, KN95 and KF94 masks used in healthcare facilities should be covered with a medical/surgical mask to protect from fluids.
- Must fit snugly against your face without gaps.

Reusing your N95, KN95, or KF94 respirators worn voluntarily

N95, KN95, and KF94 respirators are designed for single use; however, they can be safely reused when worn voluntarily outside of healthcare settings, outside of settings involving work with hazardous materials, and outside other other settings where the use of respirators is regulated. (Personnel in healthcare settings and settings where hazardous materials are present should *not* reuse respirators).

Follow this guidance when reusing a N95, KN95, or KF94 respirator worn voluntarily:

- Store in a breathable (paper) bag in between uses to extend the life of an N95 or KN95.
- Do not clean, launder or attempt to sanitize a respirator designed for single use.

- Dispose of your N95, KN95, or KF94 in a normal garbage bin when it:
 - Is specified by the manufacturer
 - Becomes dirty, wet or damaged
 - No longer covers the nose and mouth
 - Has ties or straps that are stretched out or damaged
 - Cannot stay snugly on the face
 - Has holes or tears in the fabric
 - Nose wire no longer forms to the nose

Procuring N95 and KN95 respirators for voluntary use

N95 and KN95 respirators are available for University units to purchase from the [Clean and Safe Storefront](#).

Beware that some vendors are selling counterfeit N95 respirators. [Project N95](#) aims to help people find a credible source for buying N95 and KN95 respirators.

WHEN SHOULD I WEAR A MEDICAL/SURGICAL MASK?

Medical/procedure masks are personal protective equipment (PPE) because they protect the wearer against sprays or splashes of liquid and/or provided some filtration efficiency for aerosols. Healthcare providers, personnel working within 6 feet of other people, and personnel working around hazardous materials (e.g., flammable materials, biosafety level 2 and higher) are required to wear medical/surgical masks.

How can I improve my medical/surgical mask's protection?

- **Layering a three-layer cloth mask** over a surgical/medical mask can block 85-91% of exhaled particles. (Do *not* layer two disposable masks).
- **Place a [brace](#) over a medical/surgical mask**, which can block approximately 95-99% of exhaled aerosols (airborne particles).
- Use [toggles](#) or a [knotting and tucking](#) technique to ensure a snug fit.



*Knotting and tucking technique
Source: npr.gov*

A surgical/medical mask is designed to be disposed of after each use, or after becoming contaminated, torn or wet. It cannot be effectively disinfected.

A surgical/medical mask must be put on (donned) and taken off (doffed) correctly to adequately protect you and minimize your risk of exposure; this is especially important while doffing because the outside of the mask may be contaminated.

Follow the [instructions](#) in this document for putting on and removing your facemask.

WHEN SHOULD I WEAR A CLOTH FACE COVERING?

Read the [UW Face Covering Policy and Face Covering Requirements](#) for details on when and where face coverings are required at University locations.

A cloth face covering must be worn when personnel are **working in areas where other people are present, and there is no potential exposure to hazardous materials.**

Cloth face coverings must *not* be worn in environments where the mask may become contaminated by infectious materials or other hazardous substances.

- Do *not* wear a cloth face covering alone when using flammable materials. Wear an ASTM tested medical/surgical mask instead. Wearing a face shield over the facemask is recommended.
- Do *not* wear a cloth face covering in labs at biosafety level 2 and higher, patient care areas and clean rooms. Wear a medical/surgical mask instead.



*Mask with a clear panel.
Source: cdc.gov*

Secure any loose ties before working around machinery or equipment with moving parts.

A cloth or fabric face covering cannot replace or supercede required PPE.

Some individuals may not be able to wear a cloth face covering, including individuals with disabilities and individuals who use facial movements to communicate. Clear masks or cloth masks with a clear plastic panel are an acceptable alternative type of facemask. UW units can order face coverings with clear panels from the UW [Safe and Clean Storefront](#).

How can I improve my cloth face covering's protection?

To be effective, a cloth face covering must, at minimum:

- **Fit snugly** against the sides of the face
- Completely **cover the nose and mouth**
- Be **secured** with ties, ear loops, elastic bands or other equally effective method
- Have **at least two layers** of cloth
- Have a **nose wire** to prevent air from leaking out of the top of the mask (recommended)
- Allow for **breathing** without restriction
- Be capable of being **laundered** and machine dried without damage or change to shape
- Be **free of holes, tears or valves**

You can improve the fit and effectiveness of your mask by taking these steps:

1. **Ensure the mask fits snugly against your face.** Gaps can let air with respiratory droplets leak in and out around the edges of the mask.

- Using a [mask fitter or brace](#) over a cloth mask can help prevent air from leaking around the edges of the mask.
- **Check for gaps** by cupping your hands around the outside edges of the mask. Make sure no air is flowing from the area near your eyes or from the sides of the mask. If the mask has a good fit, you may be able to see the mask material move in and out with each breath.



Mask with brace
Source: cdc.gov

2. **Add layers:**

- **Wear a disposable surgical/medical mask underneath a cloth mask.** The cloth mask should push the edges of the disposable mask against your face.
- A cloth mask should have **at least two layers** and be made of tightly woven fabrics.

3. **Other considerations:** Certain types of facial hair, such as beards, can make mask fitting difficult. People with beards can do one or more of the following:

- Shave their beards.
- Trim their beards close to the face.
- Use a [mask fitter or brace](#).
- Wear one disposable medical/surgical mask underneath a cloth mask with multiple layers of fabric.



Layered masks
Source: cdc.gov

For additional guidance, visit the CDC's webpage [Improve How Your Mask Protects You](#) and read the Public Health – Seattle & King County article [Up your mask game](#).

How should a cloth face covering be worn and cleaned?

To be effective, cloth face coverings should be worn consistently and correctly so as not to contaminate the hands or face of the user.

- Cloth face coverings should be changed when moist or dirty, and washed and dried after each use. Keep in mind the front of a facemask could be contaminated.
- Cloth face coverings must also be changed and laundered whenever potentially contaminated in order to prevent exposure for the individual wearing it.
- Follow the [instructions](#) in this document for putting on and removing a facemask.

Refer to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) website for instructions on how to select, wear and clean a cloth face covering.

HOW DO I SAFELY PUT ON, WEAR AND REMOVE A FACEMASK?

Before putting on the mask, wash your hands, use hand sanitizer and/or put on a clean pair of gloves.

1. Identify the “inside” of the mask; on a surgical/medical procedure mask this side will be white (the blue or colored side faces out). The inside of the mask faces your mouth. The metal nose wire should be on the top.
2. With inside facing you and the nose wire on the top, place the loops around the ears. Alternatively, you can tie the loops at back of your neck or the crown of your head.
3. Pull the top and bottom of the mask to expand the folds. The top of the mask should cover your nose, and the bottom should cover your chin.
4. Pinch or press the nose wire so that it fits the shape of your nose bridge.

While wearing the mask:

- Do not touch the mask while wearing it. If you do touch it, do so with gloved hands, or wash your hands immediately before and after.
- Do not eat, drink, or smoke while wearing a mask. Remove your mask before eating or drinking.
- The outside surface of the mask should never come into contact with your face; avoid pulling the mask up on your forehead or down under your nose, wearing it on your chin, or hanging it on one ear, around your neck or on your arm.

How NOT to Wear a Mask



When removing the mask:

1. Remove the mask from the face carefully, touching only the loops. Do not touch the front of the mask.
2. Dispose of disposable mask when it becomes dirty or wet. Fold a reusable mask in half and place it in a plastic bag. Wash it as soon as possible when it becomes dirty or wet.
3. Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth while removing your mask.
4. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer immediately after removing your mask.

Wearing a facemask does *not* replace the need to follow other COVID-19 prevention measures described in the [University's COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#).

WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

- [University of Washington COVID-19 Face Covering Policy](#)
- [Public Health — Seattle & King County Masking Guidance](#)
- [A video on correctly donning and doffing a surgical mask](#)
- [A video on how to correctly use a cloth face covering](#)
- [U.S. Food and Drug Administration comparison of surgical masks and N95s](#)
- [U.S. Department of Labor OSHA video comparison of surgical masks and respirators](#)
- [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\): The difference between a surgical mask and an N95 respirator](#)
- [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\): Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19](#)
- [World Health Organization guidance video on the public/non-healthcare wearing of surgical masks](#)

EH&S recognizes that each UW unit may have its own unique considerations for changing personal protective equipment recommendations. Please contact EH&S at ehsdept@uw.edu or call 206.543.7262 with questions.