



Mask Guidance for Improved Protectiveness

Updated February 1, 2022

Well-fitting, protective masks are critical public health tools for preventing the spread of COVID-19, including the more infectious Omicron variant. ***The CDC continues to recommend that you wear the most protective mask you can that fits well and that you will wear consistently.***

More detailed CDC guidance on masks can be found at these links:

- [Your Guide to Masks](#)
- [Improve How Your Masks Protects You](#)
- [Types of Masks](#)

You should wear a multi-layer mask that fits well and is comfortable. Wearing a higher-grade mask like a surgical or procedural mask, a KN95, or an N95 offers more protection, if they fit well and are tolerated.

Wear masks properly:

- Your mask should cover your nose and mouth at all times and fit snugly against your face.
- Always wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before you put on mask and after removing it.
- Check your mask each time before you put it on.
- Most masks are disposable and cannot be cleaned.
- Replace your mask if the facepiece or head straps show any signs of damage or deterioration, your mask gets moist or soiled, or your mask becomes difficult to breathe through.
- When removing your mask, handle only by the ear loops, straps or ties.
- You can store your mask temporarily to reuse later. Remove your mask correctly and wash your hands after touching a used mask. Keep your mask in a dry, breathable bag (like a paper or mesh fabric bag) to keep it clean between uses. When reusing your mask, keep the same side facing out.
- More information on putting on a mask and checking your seal can be found [here](#).

How to choose a protective mask:

- Wear the most protective mask you can that fits well and you will wear consistently. This is true for adults and children. The mask choice for an adult and child may be different because of the ability to have a good fit and comfort.
- Whatever mask you choose, it should fit well, meaning that it fits snugly on your face without any gaps along the edges or around your nose. Choose a size that fits over the nose and under the chin but does not impair vision.
- While all masks provide some level of protection, properly fitted higher grade masks like KN95s or N95s provide the highest level of protection but many of these masks are made for adults. For younger children, the best mask choice is often one with multiple layers that fits well.
- Choose masks with a nose wire or use a [mask fitter](#).

The highest quality masks, in order, are:

- **N95, KN95, or KF94s**
 - These types of masks seal tightly to the face when fitted properly and shouldn't have air coming out. Much of it is dependent on the seal around the nose. Press and adjust the nose wire to ensure a snug seal.
 - N95 masks are typically designed for adults to be used in the workplace. N95 masks may be available in smaller sizes that could fit some children but have not been tested for broad use in children. Recently, several brands of KN95 masks for children have come on the market. These masks offer a high level of filtration and a snug fit on smaller faces. They are a good option – but only if they fit well and you find them comfortable to wear for long periods of time.
 - Most of these types of masks are disposable and should be discarded when they are dirty, damaged, or difficult to breathe through.
 - Do not wear masks that have exhalation valves or other openings.
 - Do not wear these types of masks with other masks – don't double up.
- **Surgical/procedure disposable masks**
 - To make the mask fit more snugly, you can [knot or twist the ear loops](#) or wear a cloth mask over it to tighten the fit.
- **Cloth masks**
 - Should be made of 2-3 fabric layers of tightly woven cotton or cotton blend fabric, and be breathable, snug fitting and without gaps. These can be washed and re-used.

Some people do not need to wear masks, including:

- Anyone with a disability that makes it hard for them to wear or remove a mask.
- Anyone who is deaf and moves their face and mouth to communicate.
- Anyone who has been advised by a medical professional to not wear a mask because of personal health issues.
- Anyone who has trouble breathing, is unconscious, or unable to remove the mask without help.
- Babies and toddlers under age 2 should never wear masks. Children ages 2-4 are encouraged to wear a mask with adult supervision.

Where and how to find a reliable mask:

- [Project N95](#) for recommendations on brands (if not in stock)
- [CDC tips to avoid counterfeit masks](#) and [CDC tips on purchasing respirators](#)
- [NIOSH Approved N95 Respirators](#)
- [NIOSH Respirator Assessment](#) for a list of KN95 manufacturer performance and legitimacy
- N95 masks are available for health care and non-health care settings at no cost. You can request N95 masks online at <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/RequestMasks>. Please use the “Critical Infrastructure PPE Request Form” and select the correct category of organization to ensure your request is prioritized for shipment. For example, schools should select “Schools/School Transportation” for Type of Provider