

COVID-19 Face Coverings: Frequently Asked Questions

Face coverings are critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19. Wear one at all times when outside your home and around other people, and even while at home if you are with people you don't live with or if you or someone you live with is sick, recently tested positive for COVID-19, or was recently exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Face coverings save lives – wear one and wear it correctly: snug against your face and covering both your nose and mouth.

What is a face covering and how do they work?

A face covering is a well-secured cloth covering or disposable mask that covers your nose and mouth. Face coverings help prevent the spread of COVID-19 by:

- **Protecting the wearer**, by reducing their exposure to respiratory particles that may contain the virus.
- **Protecting others**, by reducing the amount of respiratory particles that enter the air when someone with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes, talks or breathes.

Some people with COVID-19 have no symptoms but can still spread the virus, which is why it's important for everyone to wear a face covering, even if they don't feel sick.

What type of face covering should I use?

Not all face coverings provide the same amount of protection. When selecting a face covering, consider the following:

- **Do not use a face covering with an exhalation valve** as it allows unfiltered exhaled air to escape.
- **Use a face covering with two or three layers** of material to better prevent unfiltered air from passing through. You can also use a cloth face covering over a disposable mask.
- Use face coverings made of **tightly woven fabric** (fabrics that do not let light pass through when held up to a light source). Face coverings should be made of **breathable fabric** (like cotton), and not of leather, plastic or other materials that make it hard to breathe.
- Make sure the face covering **fits snugly** against the sides of your face and **fully covers both your nose and mouth**, without slipping. Face coverings that fit loosely allow respiratory droplets to enter and leak out. Here are some tips to help ensure a snug fit:
 - Wear a cloth face covering over a disposable mask.
 - Wear a face covering with a nose wire.
 - Wear a face mask fitter or brace.
 - Knot the ear loops and fold or tuck extra material.
- **Consider using higher-grade masks, such as a KN95 mask**, which is similar in design and function to N95 respirators used by healthcare workers.
 - N95 respirators should be reserved for healthcare settings.

If you are 65 or older or have an [underlying medical condition](#) that increases your risk of severe COVID-19, you need to be extra careful. Also, people who care for someone who is sick and people who are in prolonged close contact with non-household members while indoors (such as people who regularly work in-person with members of the public and people riding subways, airplanes, buses or other public transportation) may need added protection. In such cases, consider wearing two masks (a cloth covering over a disposable mask) or using a higher-grade mask like a KN95 mask.

More information is available on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [website](#).

How do I wear two face coverings?

Wearing two face coverings can provide you and others with added protection by increasing the number of layers of material and making for a snugger fit. When wearing two face coverings, consider the following:

- Use one cloth face covering and one disposable mask. The disposable mask should be worn underneath and the cloth face covering on top.
- Do not use two disposable masks.
- Do not use a face covering over or under a KN95 mask. A KN95 should be worn alone.

Who must wear a face covering?

New York State (NYS) law requires everyone over age 2 who can medically tolerate a face covering to wear one when in public if unable to maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others. Examples include walking on a busy street, shopping in stores, seeing your doctor, dining at a restaurant (when not eating or drinking), going to your place of worship or attending a gathering. You **must** wear a face covering at all times when riding public transportation, such as the subway, ferry, bus, taxis and car services.

We strongly recommend you wear a face covering as much as possible when in a shared indoor space outside your home, such as places of worship, offices, and someone else's home, even if you can maintain 6 feet of distance from others. Wear a face covering at all times when around someone who is sick or if you need to leave home while sick.

When should I wear a face covering while at home?

There are times you should wear a face covering even while at home. Wear a face covering:

- If you live with others and you are sick, recently tested positive for COVID-19 or were recently exposed to someone with COVID-19 (unless you are alone in a separate room); you should also wear a face covering when you are around pets.
- If someone else in your household is sick, recently tested positive for COVID-19 or was recently exposed to someone with COVID-19 (unless you are in a separate room).
- If someone you do not live with is in your home; you should also ask them to wear a face covering.

What if I live in group housing with shared facilities?

If you live in a facility that has shared kitchens, bathrooms or other common spaces, wear a face covering when you leave your apartment or room.

Do children need to wear a face covering?

Children over age 2 must wear a face covering. Consider the following:

- For young children, try to find a smaller face covering or one made for children. If you cannot, shorten or adjust the face covering straps to make sure the face covering fits snugly.
- Small children are more likely to touch their face covering, so caretakers should wash children's hands or apply hand sanitizer often.
- Schools and child care programs have special requirements. Please check with your child's school or program.

What if I have a health problem that makes it hard for me to wear a face covering. Do I still need to wear one?

If you have a health problem that makes you unable to tolerate a face covering, you do not need to wear one. This makes practicing physical distancing and hand hygiene even more essential.

Do I need to wear a face covering when I am exercising?

If you are exercising outside, you do not need to wear a face covering as long as you maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others. When exercising in an indoor gym or fitness facility, you must wear a face covering at all times (unless medically unable to tolerate a face covering or under age 2). Per [NYS requirements](#), bandanas, buffs and gaiters are **not** acceptable face coverings for use in gyms and fitness centers.

Do I need to wear a face covering while at work?

You must wear a face covering at work, unless you are certain you can maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others (including co-workers, customers, clients and visitors). Employers must provide face coverings to employees for free. Your employer may have additional requirements as to when a face covering, or other protection, is needed. Even if 6 feet of distance can be maintained, wearing a face covering as much as possible when working indoors and around other people is strongly recommended. If you cannot medically tolerate a face covering, discuss with your employer whether a reasonable accommodation is possible.

I had COVID-19 and am better now. Do I still need to wear a face covering?

Yes. The NYS requirement for wearing a face covering applies even if you had COVID-19.

I was vaccinated against COVID-19. Do I still need to wear a face covering?

Yes. We need to be cautious until more people are vaccinated and until there has been more time for us to better understand the impact of the vaccines on the spread of COVID-19. As such, you must still wear a face covering and practice physical distancing and other COVID-19 prevention measures after being vaccinated.

Can I wear a face shield instead of a face covering?

A face shield is not an acceptable substitute for a face covering at this time. More research is needed regarding the effectiveness of face shields in stopping respiratory droplets from spreading. Face shields may be considered for use by someone who cannot medically tolerate a face covering or in addition to wearing a face covering. It should not substitute a face covering.

How often do I need to wash my face covering?

We recommend washing cloth face coverings once a day or after about eight hours of use. You can wash cloth face coverings by hand or machine using detergent and hot water. The face covering should be fully dry before using.

For how long can I use a disposable face covering?

There is no set length of time. You may be able to use the same disposable face covering for up to five days. You should discard disposable face coverings if they become damaged, dirty or wet.

Are there precautions I should take with my face covering?

Using face coverings incorrectly can spread germs. For this reason, it is important to properly wear, store and dispose of face coverings by doing the following:

- Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer every time you put on and take off your face covering. If you are unable to clean your hands, be very careful not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Do not put face coverings where others can touch them or where germs trapped in your face covering can touch other surfaces, such as countertops or your kitchen table.
- Do not throw your face covering loose in a bag or backpack. Keep a small bag with you to store your face covering if you will be taking it off when outside your home.
- Discard disposable face coverings in the garbage. Do not throw them on the street.
- See [How to Put On a Face Covering](#) for more information.

Is it possible to make my own face covering?

Yes. See the CDC's website for [instructions](#) on making a cloth face covering.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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