

Does the General Public Need a Mask/Respirator for Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)?

At this time, health officials in the U.S. do not recommend the use of surgical masks or respirators among people not showing symptoms of COVID-19. People in places where spread is more likely may have been instructed to wear surgical masks to prevent infecting others and to possibly prevent getting ill from close contact in crowded places.

Risky when not used properly:

Training: Healthcare workers are trained in how to properly put on and take off this equipment without contaminating themselves. Don't underestimate this. Past experience with highly infectious diseases tells us that lack of knowledge in this area can make people sick.

Reuse: Improper reuse of a dirty or old surgical mask or respirator by untrained personnel won't help and has potential to get you sick.

Storage: Improper storage can contaminate your home or workplace.

Removal: Respirators and some surgical masks have an elastic band that can snap if you are not careful when you remove them. That can disperse particles into the air.

Important when used by trained healthcare workers:

Patient Exposure: Healthcare workers are in closer contact with potentially sick people than the rest of the public, so they are more likely to be exposed.

Risky Procedures: Healthcare workers sometimes need to do procedures on patients that can generate a kind of aerosol spray that puts them at greater risk of infection.

Limited Supply: It is important that healthcare workers do not run out of personal protective equipment (PPE) so that they can safely care for people at greatest risk for infection. We do not believe use of these items is necessary for the general public at this time. If you obtain masks/respirators from healthcare facilities, there will be less for healthcare workers.

These Two Things are Sometimes Called "Masks"

Surgical mask: Protects from droplets



- Typically ties on or is looped around the ears and is looser fitting.
- Used primarily as a barrier to keep sick people from getting others sick by preventing droplets from spreading through coughing and/or sneezing.
- Some surgical masks have a clear face shield attached to cover the eyes. This can keep bigger droplets of things like blood from splashing into someone's eyes and face during surgery.

N-95 respirator: Protects from airborne particles



- Looks a lot like a mask too, but it is really a respirator (that filters out 95% of very small airborne particles when worn properly).
- Healthcare workers are fit-tested so these masks fit tightly over the nose and mouth creating a seal. This prevents healthcare workers from breathing airborne particles from sick patients.
- When they are old, soiled, or wet they no longer filter properly and aren't useful.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a lot of details on the best way to keep yourself safe from COVID-19. For more information, visit their website at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html>

For international guidance on the need for masks or respirators go to:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>