

GUIDANCE ON FACEMASK USE FOR PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

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FACEMASK OVERVIEW

DOES WEARING A FACEMASK HELP PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19?

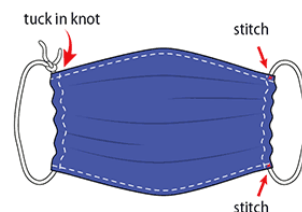
Keeping a distance (at least six feet) from other people is our best protection against COVID-19; however, wearing a facemask can add another layer of protection. Masks can help protect others by containing respiratory droplets when the mask wearer coughs, sneezes or speaks.

[Recent studies](#) indicate that a portion of individuals with coronavirus lack symptoms (“asymptomatic”) and that those who eventually develop symptoms (“pre-symptomatic”) can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms. Public health officials believe that mask use by non-healthcare workers can help decrease the spread of COVID-19, even if the individual wearing the mask is not showing symptoms.

It is not clear whether masks worn by non-healthcare workers can prevent an individual from getting infected with the virus that causes COVID-19.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASK AND A CLOTH FACE COVERING?

- **Medical/procedure masks are prioritized for healthcare providers** who are working on the front lines to protect us all. There are shortages of these masks, and it's critically important that healthcare workers have the equipment they need to do their jobs.
 - UW Medicine employees can refer to the [UW Medicine Mask Policy](#).
 - Medical/procedure masks may be used by UW employees doing work to support critical operations where they may not be able to maintain a distance of at least six feet between themselves and others at all times. These employees must perform a [risk assessment](#) and identify medical/procedure masks as part of their required personal protective equipment (PPE).
- **A cloth or fabric face covering is not considered PPE, but it may protect persons nearby from the wearer's respiratory droplets.**
 - Wearing a cloth face covering does **not** replace social/physical distancing, practicing good hygiene, and staying home when sick. These are the most important steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 illness.
 - Data on the use of cloth face coverings to prevent COVID-19 transmission in non-health care settings is limited.
 - For the general public, [homemade fabric face coverings](#), especially if well-made and fit snugly, may provide some benefit.



WHEN ARE CLOTH FACE COVERINGS NEEDED?

- **Face coverings are required to be worn indoors where other people are present. This is because keeping at least a 6-foot distance may not be possible. This includes common areas, such as hallways, stairways, restrooms and elevators.**
- **Face coverings are required to be worn outdoors whenever keeping a 6-foot distance from other people may not be possible.**
- Governor Inslee's ["Safe Start" requirements](#) for workplaces indicate cloth face coverings should be worn when personnel are:
 - **Working in areas where other people are present, and**
 - **There is no potential exposure to hazardous materials.** If personnel are working in an area where work with hazardous materials is taking place (e.g.,

hazardous chemical use, work with biohazards), a surgical mask and/or other appropriate PPE should be worn.

- Public Health — Seattle & King County issued a [Local Health Officer Directive](#) strongly urging the use of cloth face coverings in indoor and outdoor public settings when 6 feet of distance cannot be maintained between people.
- **Unless a surgical mask is indicated, cloth face coverings are preferred** in order to conserve medical/procedure masks and N95 respirators for healthcare workers. Face coverings include cloth facemasks, scarves and bandanas.
- **Some individuals may not be able to wear a cloth face covering**, including those with physical disabilities that prevent wearing a mask safely, or those who are deaf and use facial movements to help communicate. See the King County Directive for more information on these groups.

ABOUT CLOTH FACE COVERINGS

CAN WEARING A CLOTH FACE COVERING PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19?

- **Yes.** Wearing a fabric face covering can help prevent the spread of infection to others when worn by someone who has virus that causes COVID-19, even if they don't have symptoms and don't know they are infected. A mask will block infectious droplets from spreading when an infected person wearing a mask coughs, sneezes and speaks.
- Cloth face coverings may provide some of the same benefits as a medical/procedure mask (minimizing splash/droplet contact with the nose and mouth, preventing spread of your own respiratory droplets). However, they are not a substitute for existing guidance to maintain 6-feet of physical distance and practice good hygiene.

In order to be effective cloth face coverings must:

- Fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
- Be secured with ties or ear loops
- Include multiple layers of fabric
- Allow for breathing without restriction
- Be able to be laundered and machine dried without altering shape or damage
- Wearing a face covering does not replace the need to practice physical distancing (staying at least 6 feet away from others), staying home when sick, frequent handwashing and avoiding touching the face.
- It is not known how much protection homemade cloth face coverings provide to the person wearing them, and this may depend on the quality of the covering and how well it fits. For this reason, homemade and fabric face coverings should not be

considered personal protective equipment (PPE). Cloth face coverings do **not** replace or supersede job-specific PPE requirements.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19](#) provides instructions for making a homemade cloth face covering.

WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE TO WEAR A CLOTH MASK WHILE WORKING?

- **Cloth masks are not a replacement for medical/procedure masks;** they aren't regulated by any performance criteria, and they don't provide the same level of protection in terms of moisture resistance and particle penetration. For this reason, wearing cloth masks is most appropriate under the following circumstances:
 - The work being performed has [lower-risk](#) for potential exposure to COVID-19 positive individuals and/or other social distancing measures can be implemented successfully (i.e., limited occupational contact with the public and other coworkers).
 - Outside of work, in public settings, and outdoors where a 6-foot physical distance is difficult to maintain. Riding public transit is a good example of this.
- **Cloth face coverings are not appropriate in some work environments.** They cannot be adequately decontaminated, and therefore may 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 if it can be entangled in machinery.
 - Do **not** wear a cloth face covering when using flammable materials.
 - Disposable surgical masks (not cloth face coverings) should be worn in labs at biosafety level 2 and higher, patient care areas and clean rooms.

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 and washed and dried after each use. Coverings that have been worn may be biologically contaminated.
- Cloth face coverings must also be changed and laundered whenever potentially contaminated in order to prevent exposure for the individual wearing it.
- The standard steps for wearing a medical/procedure facemask also apply to wearing cloth face coverings, including washing hands before donning and doffing.
 - Refer to the instructions "[How do I wear a medical/procedure mask correctly?](#)" in this document.
 - Read the [instructions](#) for wearing a cloth face covering from Public Health — Seattle & King County.

- See the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](https://www.cdc.gov) website for instructions on making and wearing a homemade cloth face covering.

DO wear a fabric mask safely.



- ✓ Always wash your hands before and after wearing a mask.
- ✓ Use the ties or loops to put your mask on and pull it off.
- ✓ Don't touch the front of the mask, especially when you take it off.
- ✓ Put on and remove your mask while inside your home. Public transportation, elevators and stairwells can be high-contamination areas.
- ✓ Wash and dry your cloth mask daily and keep it in a clean, dry place.
- ✓ Remember that masks offer only limited protection and work best in combination with hand washing and physical distancing.

Source: [Public Health — Seattle & King County](https://www.seattleandkingcounty.gov)

ABOUT MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASKS

WHAT IS A MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASK?

- A medical/procedure mask is a loose-fitting disposable protective mask that covers the mouth and nose, and is generally designed for use in a healthcare setting. They may also be called dental, isolation, laser, medical, procedure, or simply facemasks. They are attached to the face either by elastic loops over the ears, or by two ties at the neck and back of the head.
- Medical/procedure masks are tested by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) on how their material is resistant to fluid and particle penetration to ensure they provide adequate protection. They are considered medical devices, and must go through an approval process with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WEARING A MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASK?

- They are very effective at preventing potentially infectious droplets from spreading **when worn by a sick person.**
- They keep individuals from touching mucous membranes (mouth and nose) with their potentially contaminated hands.
- They prevent large droplets, splashes or sprays that may occur during work from contacting mucous membranes.

WHAT ARE THE DRAWBACKS OF WEARING A MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASK?

- They do not seal around the mouth and nose, and therefore do not prevent you from inhaling smaller airborne particles. Leakage occurs around all edges of the

mask. This means they do not filter or block very small particles in the air that may be transmitted by coughs, sneezes, or certain medical procedures. Those who are exposed to these kinds of aerosols at work will need to wear a tight-fitting respirator, such as an N95. ([Infographic: Understanding the difference between surgical masks and N95 respirators](#)). N95 use is generally reserved for healthcare providers. Those who choose to obtain and wear N95s for their personal use should review the [Advisory Information for Employees who Voluntarily Use Respirators](#).

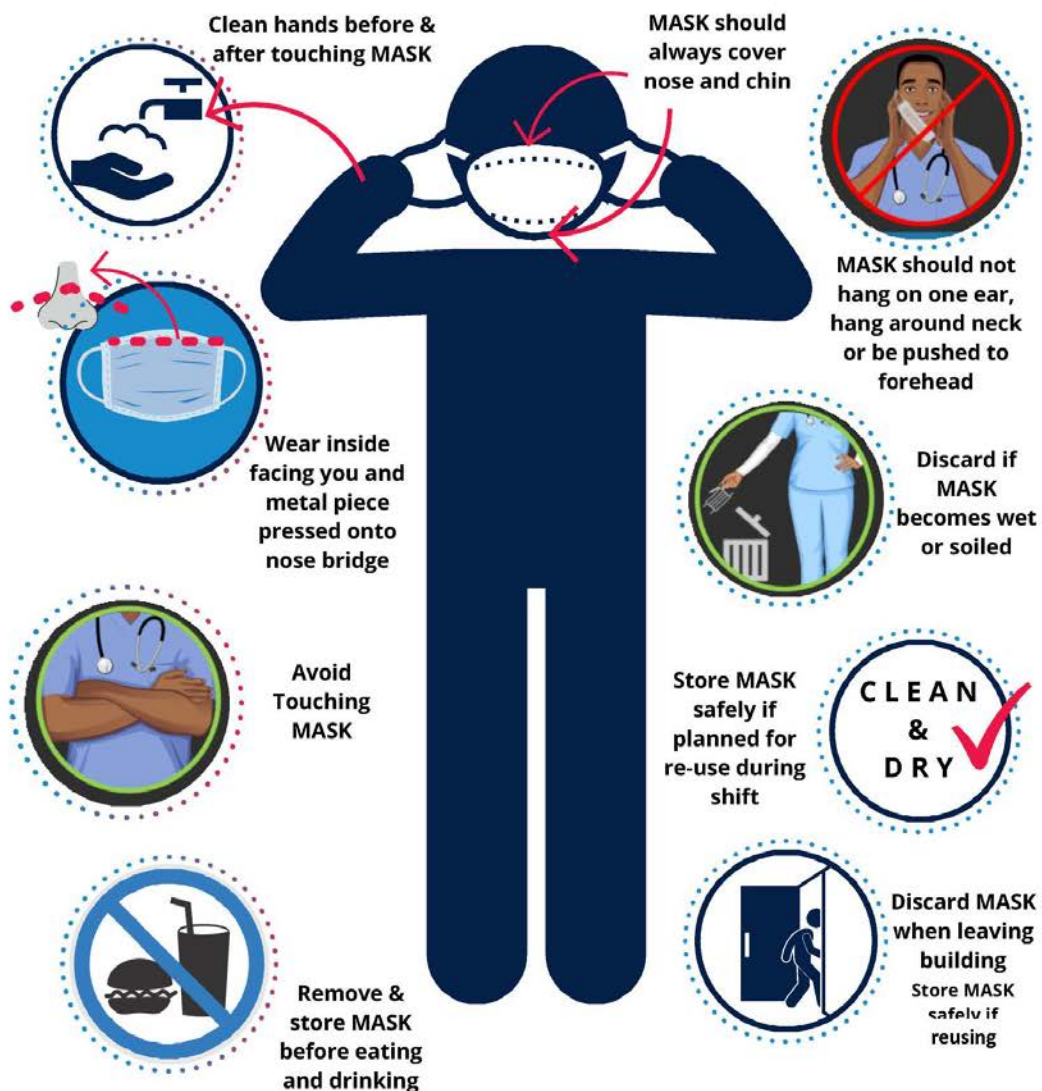
- They can only be worn once, and must be disposed of after use or after becoming contaminated. They cannot be effectively disinfected.
- Some may find them difficult to breathe through.
- They need to be put on (donned) and taken off (doffed) correctly in order to work appropriately and minimize exposure risk; this is especially important while doffing, as the outside of the mask may be contaminated.

HOW DO I WEAR A MEDICAL/PROCEDURE MASK CORRECTLY?

1. Wash your hands, use hand sanitizer and/or put on a clean pair of gloves prior to donning the mask.
2. Identify the “inside” of the medical/procedure mask- this should be white. This side faces your mouth. The blue or colored side faces out. The metal noseband should be on the top.
3. With white side facing in and noseband on the top, place the loops around the ears or tie the straps at the neck and at the crown of your head.
4. Pull the top and bottom of the mask to expand the folds. The top of the mask should extend above your nose, and the bottom should extend below your chin.
5. Pinch or press the noseband so that it conforms to your nose bridge.
6. Do not touch the mask if possible while wearing. If you do touch it, do so with gloved hands, or wash your hands immediately before and after.
7. Do not eat, drink, or smoke while wearing the mask.
8. Remove the mask from the face carefully, touching only the bands and not the outside surface. The outside surface should not come into contact with your face; avoid pulling the mask up over your forehead or down over your chin.
9. Dispose of the mask when soiled or wet. Wash hands or use hand sanitizer after taking the mask off.

Wearing a medical/procedure mask does not replace the need to follow guidance to stay home and limit our contact with others. It does not replace frequent handwashing, avoiding touching the face, and staying away from people who are ill. These are the most important steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 illness.

Important Safety Tips for Wearing Face Masks



Adapted from UCSF

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RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Public Health — Seattle & King County Directive and FAQs on cloth face coverings](#)
- [A video on correctly donning and doffing a surgical mask](#)
- [A video on how to correctly use a cloth face covering](#)
- [FDA comparison of surgical masks and N95s](#)
- [OSHA video comparison of surgical masks and respirators](#)
- [CDC: The difference between a surgical mask and an N95 respirator](#)
- [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.