

# Which Mask for Which Task?

*COVID-19 Prevention at Work: When to Use Face Coverings, Disposable Facemasks and Respirators*

This information is current as of Sept. 13, 2021.



Division of Occupational Safety and Health



[www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health)



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Washington State Department of  
**Labor & Industries**



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# Introduction

Cloth face coverings, disposable face masks, and respirators are important tools to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Used along with physical distancing and physical barriers, they can help protect workers and the public.

This guidance supplements the technical guidance in, *Washington State Coronavirus Hazard Considerations for Employers (except COVID-19 Care in Hospitals and Clinics): Face Coverings, Masks, and Respirator Choices*, available at [www.Lni.wa.gov/MaskConsiderations](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/MaskConsiderations).

The information in this document does not apply to workers who care for or treat active COVID-19 patients in hospitals and clinics. Employers of those workers must follow Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines for selecting respirators and other personal protective equipment (PPE). More information on CDC guidelines is available at [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/hcp](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/hcp).

## Why wear a face covering, disposable mask, or respirator?

COVID-19 continues to be a dangerous and deadly virus. The virus can spread into the air on tiny particles of saliva when an infected person breathes, talks, coughs, or sneezes. Many infected people don't have noticeable symptoms (if asymptomatic), so they might spread the virus to others without knowing it.

Wearing a cloth face covering, disposable facemask, or respirator at work can lessen the risk for spreading the coronavirus. Being vaccinated, practicing physical distancing, and washing hands and cleaning surfaces regularly also helps reduce risk for spreading the virus at work.

**Cloth face coverings** help keep exhaled particles from escaping into the air, but don't effectively filter out particles already in the air.

**Disposable facemasks** are usually more protective than cloth face coverings.

**Respirators** offer a higher level of protection than cloth face coverings and disposable facemasks

because they also prevent wearers from inhaling particles already in the air.

All three provide some protection when a person coughs and sneezes nearby. Some that are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) provide more protection against coughs and sneezes.

## Do I need to mask up if I work alone?

No. Anyone working or driving alone is not required to wear a mask.

"Alone" means you are isolated from interactions with the public and others and have little or no expectation of in-person interruptions. If you are working alone but need to pass another person once or twice a day (e.g., to exit a building or use a restroom), a cloth face covering would be required during passing if you can't maintain physical distancing.

Examples of working alone include:

- A sole occupant in an office with a closed door who is unlikely to be visited
- Delivery drivers with no face-to-face interaction with others when picking up or dropping off packages
- A lone janitor in an unoccupied building (or on a unoccupied floor)
- A farm worker or crane operator in an enclosed cab

## What if I'm fully vaccinated?

Workers in all industries, regardless of vaccination status, must wear a cloth face covering (if a more protective mask isn't otherwise required<sup>1</sup>) when working indoors around the public.

When fully vaccinated workers<sup>2</sup> are indoors but not working around the public they can

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1. Per [www.Lni.wa.gov/agency/\\_docs/wacoronavirushazardconsiderationemployers.pdf](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/agency/_docs/wacoronavirushazardconsiderationemployers.pdf)

2. As defined by the Centers for Disease Control at [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/fully-vaccinated.html)

choose to not wear a cloth face covering if allowed by their employer who has verified their vaccination status.

Aside from cloth face covering requirements, fully vaccinated workers in medium or high risk exposure categories may be required by their employer to use more protective masks.

When mask use isn't required, workers can still, by law, opt to voluntarily wear one as long as it's safe.

### **Are cloth face coverings required when working outdoors?**

When outdoors, vaccinated and unvaccinated workers are required to wear a cloth face covering at events or gatherings attended by 500 or more people. Cloth face coverings are recommended for all other crowded outdoor settings with less than 500 people when it's not feasible to physically distance.

### **Can my employer require me to wear a more protective mask?**

Yes. Employers may choose to require a more protective mask to prevent COVID-19 as long as it is safe.

### **Can I use a face shield instead of a face covering?**

No. A face shield is not a substitute for a cloth face covering. Face shields allow particles exhaled from the wearer to freely move around the edges of the shield and into the open air for others to breathe. Face shields may be worn along with cloth face coverings to protect workers from others who sneeze or cough nearby or to protect from splashes when diluting or applying harmful liquids like bleach or cleaning chemicals.

### **If I'm required to wear a cloth face covering, can I choose to wear something more protective?**

Yes. Employees, by law, have the right to voluntarily use a medical procedure mask, KN95, or even an N95 instead of using a cloth face covering as long as using a more protective mask is safe.

### **What if I have a medical or disability issue?**

For some workers, medical issues or disabilities make face coverings unsafe to wear. To be considered exempt from face-covering requirements, workers must provide their employer with an accommodation statement from their health care provider. The statement must specify that the worker should not wear a face covering because of a health condition or disability. Employers with workers who are unable to wear a face covering must take alternative steps to prevent the spread of the virus.

A face shield that includes a cloth extension attached along the entire edge of the shield is an acceptable alternative for workers seeking accommodation related to cloth face coverings.

Employers should assess any negative impacts that face coverings might have on workers with disabilities and adjust for accommodations per the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) process at [www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/fact-sheet-disability-discrimination](http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/fact-sheet-disability-discrimination).

In addition, workers may remove their masks to communicate with people who are deaf or hard of hearing so they can read facial cues or lip-read, while keeping at least six feet or a physical barrier between them. If workers remove their mask to accommodate a deaf person, the employer should ensure that alternative protections are in place to prevent the spread of the virus.

### **Is physical distancing still important when I'm required to wear a mask?**

Yes. Face coverings, disposable facemasks, and respirators do not replace physical distancing. COVID-19 related building occupancy limits are no longer in place, so strict physical distancing may not always be possible; but keeping people separated when there is room is important. When physical distancing isn't possible, more protective masks may be required.

Besides staying at least six feet away from others, workers must still practice hand washing, cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces and tools, and follow other critical safety measures required by the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries (L&I) ([www.Lni.wa.gov/CovidSafety](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/CovidSafety)).

## Low Risk

A reusable cloth face covering is required when risk for transmission is low. Workers who are fully vaccinated can choose to not wear a face covering when not working around the public and their employer doesn't require it.

Risk for transmission is generally low:

- When traveling with or working indoors around the public or others while staying at least six feet apart, except for briefly passing by others up to several times a day.

### Examples of low-risk scenarios:

- A driver and passenger sitting six feet apart in a well-ventilated vehicle.
- A receptionist sitting behind a physical barrier.
- Workstations set up so workers are always kept at least 6 feet apart in a well-ventilated space.
- Custodial or housekeeping staff who can stay safely away from others and no one is suspected or known to have COVID-19.



Examples of cloth face coverings for use during low-risk work.

*Top photo provided by author Doc James,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HomemadeFacemask.jpg>*

## Medium Risk

A disposable facemask (e.g., medical procedure mask or surgical mask) is required when risk for transmission is medium. Workers who are fully vaccinated can choose to not wear a mask as long as their employer doesn't require it.

Risk for transmission is generally medium when:

- Traveling or working indoors around others and you cannot stay at least six feet apart or behind a physical barrier.
- Working in the presence of a person quarantined or isolated due to COVID-19.
- Providing health care

### Examples of medium-risk jobs and scenarios:

- Kitchen workers.
- Transit operators.
- Staff who clean a room or house occupied by a person quarantined due to COVID-19.
- Crews of workers riding to a jobsite in a well-ventilated van.
- Dentists, doctors, nurses, or physical therapists working with patients not suspected or known to have COVID-19.



Examples of masks for use during medium-risk work. From top to bottom: KN95, surgical-style mask.

# High Risk

A respirator is required when risk for transmission is high. Workers who are fully vaccinated can choose to not wear a respirator as long as their employer decides to not require it after conducting an activity-specific exposure assessment<sup>1</sup>.

In addition:

- Workers must wear goggles or face shields to protect their eyes during face-to-face interactions when not using full-facepiece respirator styles.
- Ensure a medical-style mask is used by patients and others, when feasible, during face-to-face tasks for as long as possible during transport or care.

Respirators used for high-risk activities must be approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) or by an equivalent approval body from outside the United States. Examples include: elastomeric (rubber-like) half- or full-facepiece respirators with cartridges, tight or loose-fitting powered air-purifying respirators (PAPRs) with particulate cartridges, and filtering facepiece N-, R-, or P-95s to 100s.

Risk for transmission is considered high when:

- Workers are not fully vaccinated and travel or work within breathing distance of others.
- Workers are not fully vaccinated and work around other during physically strenuous work or other activities causing increased respiration.
- Any worker performing a task with more than one condition that could increase their risk for exposures (e.g., they perform physically demanding work **and** are in close proximity to each other).
- Any worker in the vicinity of an aerosol generating procedure.
- Providing care to someone known or suspected to have COVID-19.

## Examples of high-risk scenarios:

- Using an ultrasonic scaler or air-and-water syringe on a client in a dentist office.
- Administering medication with a nebulizer.
- Performing spirometry or coaching a client on deep breathing exercises.
- Providing bathing assistance to residents in an adult family care home.
- Work crews in confined spaces.
- EMTs transporting people with COVID-19.

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1. Per [www.Lni.wa.gov/agency/\\_docs/wacoronavirushazardconsiderationemployers.pdf](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/agency/_docs/wacoronavirushazardconsiderationemployers.pdf)





Examples of NIOSH-approved respirators for use during high-risk work. From left to right, top to bottom: N95 filtering facepiece, elastomeric half-facepiece with particulate (HEPA) filters, elastomeric full-facepiece with particulate (HEPA) filters, loose fitting PAPR with particulate (HEPA) filters.

*Top left photo provided by author Banej, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3M\\_N95\\_Part particulate\\_Respirator.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:3M_N95_Part particulate_Respirator.JPG)*

# Use and Care

When respirators are required<sup>1</sup>, follow Respirator Program requirements to ensure workers receive a medical evaluation, fit test, and training; and practice maintenance, storage, and other necessary provisions as required by the Respirators rule in Chapter 296-842 WAC ([www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-rules/rules-by-chapter/?chapter=842](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-rules/rules-by-chapter/?chapter=842)).

When respirators aren't required for COVID-19 prevention, but the worker opts to use one, employers must follow voluntary use requirements in the Respirators rule to ensure safe use.

If workers are required to use an N95 or other tight-fitting respirator, they must be clean shaven so the respirator can form a reliably tight face seal. PAPRs with loose-fitting hoods do not require fit testing and may be an alternative for bearded workers.

## Protecting workers from retaliation or discrimination

It is against the law for employers to fire, demote, retaliate, or discriminate against workers for exercising their safety and health rights. Those include the right to:

- Raise safety and health concerns with employers.
- Participate in union activities related to safety and health.
- File safety and health complaints.
- Participate in Division of Occupational Safety & Health (DOSH) investigations.

- Voluntarily use face coverings, goggles, and other protective devices or equipment when it's safe to do so and meets workplace health and safety requirements.
- Seek accommodation due to age or an underlying health condition that puts them at high risk for severe illness (as defined by the CDC).
- Refuse to perform unsafe work when the refusal meets certain requirements.

Workers can file retaliation complaints with DOSH and/or with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) within 30 days of the alleged incident.

Learn more:

[www.Lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceDiscrimination](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceDiscrimination).

## Resources

Call a consultant near you at 1-800-547-8367 or email [DOSHConsultation@Lni.wa.gov](mailto:DOSHConsultation@Lni.wa.gov) for free, confidential help. [www.Lni.wa.gov/DOSHConsultation](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/DOSHConsultation).

The DOSH coronavirus website ([www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-topics/topics/coronavirus](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-topics/topics/coronavirus)) includes resources from the CDC and OSHA.

Washington State Department of Health: [www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus](http://www.doh.wa.gov/Emergencies/Coronavirus).

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