

Selecting and using face masks or coverings in the workplace

A cloth face covering and /or a face mask does not replace other required personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary for your research and laboratory/ work space such as safety goggles, face shields etc.

Cloth Face Coverings are not considered to be personal protective equipment. CDC and the NYS DOH have recommended the use of cloth face covering to reduce the spread of respiratory droplets from the wearer into the environment when the wearer talks, coughs, sneezes etc. These provide minimal protection to the wearer. For example: cloth mask, bandana, scarf etc

Surgical Masks are made of non-woven fabric like polypropylene. These masks are meant to prevent the wearer from spreading droplets, sprays, etc., while coughing, sneezing or talking. Surgical masks are regulated by the FDA.

N95 masks are considered personal protective equipment used for specific operations. These masks can be used only after proper training, medical evaluation and fit testing.

The DO's and Don'ts of Face Masks

Do's

- If using reusable cloth face coverings:
 - Maintain at least two coverings per person
 - These should be used for travel to and from laboratory
 - User must take the covering home every day to be laundered.
 - These cloth coverings can machine washed in warm or hot water. Alternatively, check material care instructions and clean reusable masks in a manner consistent with manufacturer instructions
 - Consider providing an appropriate method and storage location within the workplace so that they can be kept clean, dry, and prevent contamination when not in use. For example; carefully fold the mask so the contaminated outside is folded inward and against itself. Store in clean paper bags, manila envelopes, or open plastic bags
- The surface of face masks could have concentrated virus/bacteria after use, you should wash your hands if you touch the surface of the masks or after you take it off and dispose it
- Plan for supply of disposable face masks in areas and locations where there may be heavy usage
- Review material of construction and check it against the types of materials and hazards that may be encountered in the workplace for compatibility.
- Choose materials best suited for the hazard – for e.g.,
 - when working with pyrophoric, and/or flammable chemicals use face masks made from 100 % cotton or flame resistant non permeable materials (polyaramids: Nomex®)
 - When working with corrosives, a face shield should be used in addition to the face mask
- Researchers working with hazardous chemicals, biologicals and radioactive materials must dispose their face mask at the end of their work day
 - If contaminated with hazardous materials, dispose of face mask in accordance with disposal requirements for the contaminating material
 - If not contaminated, face masks may be thrown into the regular garbage
- In general, when using a reusable face covering or a disposable face mask:

- Consider environmental factors for persons who may work outside – hotter, more humid weather adds a greater amount of stress to the body and can make some face coverings more restrictive
- Reassess hazards from moving parts or tight spaces where straps from masks could get caught
- To avoid safety glasses from fogging, make sure that the mask fits well and wash / spray lenses with soapy water. Alternatively, anti- fog wipes and solutions are available for purchase
- It may be removed when eating/ drinking

Don'ts

- Don't limit reusable coverings to one style or material – the covering should be adequate for workplace hazards but also allow alternative solutions whenever possible
- Don't use tie behind surgical masks, bandanas, scarves in areas where there are moving parts or equipment or where strings could get caught or tangled such as machine shops
- Don't substitute the requirement of specific PPE (such as an N95) with a face covering - the more stringent requirement always takes precedence.
- Don't use an N95 mask when the experiment/ procedure does not require it
- Don't use a face mask or a respirator with an exhalation valve because the valve allows unfiltered air to escape out.
- Don't co-mingle face coverings for example: if a reusable face covering is worn inside the laboratory it may be contaminated then it should be treated similar to your lab coat and not used in public spaces. Always have a clean face covering as a reserve for such situations.
- Don't wear reusable cloth coverings in areas,
 - where biological/infectious contamination is a concern (such as labs operating at Biosafety Level 2) - provide a supply of disposable masks in these areas
 - where hazardous chemicals, radioactive materials are used
- Don't require a person to wear a face covering if they have advice from their personal physician not to wear one – consult *Human Resources* about possible alternative accommodations
- Don't allow for higher population density based on the requirement for masks – everyone should still maintain adequate social distancing at all times