COVID-19 Face Coverings: Frequently Asked Questions

Face coverings are critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19. If you are not vaccinated against COVID-19, wear a face covering at all times when outside your home and around other people and even sometimes at home. People who are fully vaccinated do not have to wear a face covering in many settings but must wear one sometimes.

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:

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

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.
- 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 (double-masking).
  - 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.
- Unvaccinated people who are age 65 or older or have an **underlying medical condition** that increases their risk of severe COVID-19 may want to consider wearing two face coverings or a KN95 or other higher-grade mask that is similar in design and function to N95 respirators, particularly in indoor, crowded settings. **Note:** N95 respirators should be reserved for health care settings.

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. If you decide to wear two face coverings:
• 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 mask should be worn alone.

See How to Wear Two Face Coverings for more information.

Who must wear a face covering and where?
Everyone over age 2 who can medically tolerate a face covering must wear one in some settings. The settings in which you must wear a face covering differ depending on whether you have been vaccinated against COVID-19.

If you are unvaccinated, you must wear a face covering:
• Whenever you are in a shared, indoor space outside your home. Examples include walking on a busy street, shopping in stores, seeing your health care provider, dining at a restaurant (when not eating or drinking), going to your place of worship, being in a shared office or attending a gathering.
• When riding public transportation (including taxis and car services).
• When around someone who is sick, or if you need to leave home while sick.

Once you are fully vaccinated (two weeks after receiving a single-dose vaccine or your second dose of a two-dose vaccine), you can do most activities without wearing a face covering or physical distancing. However, you must still wear a face covering:
• When riding public transportation (including taxis and car services).
• When in a store, restaurant or other public space where the owner or operator requires face coverings.
• When in a school or health care setting.
• In certain group residential facilities, such as nursing homes and homeless shelters.
• At work, if required by your employer.
• When around someone who is sick, or if you need to leave home while sick.

Even if you are fully vaccinated, our advice is to keep your face covering on indoors until even more people are vaccinated.

When should I wear a face covering while at home?
There are times you should wear a face covering, even while at home.

If you are unvaccinated, wear a face covering:
• If you live with others and 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 around pets (people can spread COVID-19 to their 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).

If you are fully vaccinated, wear a face covering:
• If you live with others and are sick or recently tested positive for COVID-19 (unless you are alone in a separate room). You should also wear a face covering when around pets.
• If someone else in your household is sick or recently tested positive for COVID-19 (unless you are in a separate room).

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. The facility may require face coverings in shared spaces, even if you are fully vaccinated.

Do children need to wear a face covering?
Children over age 2 must wear a face covering in the same places adults must wear them. Consider the following:
• For young children, try to find a smaller face covering or one made for children. If you cannot find one, 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 face covering requirements. Please check with your child’s school or program.

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 if you are fully vaccinated or if you are unvaccinated and can maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others. When exercising in an indoor gym or fitness facility, unvaccinated people must wear a face covering at all times. Per New York State (NYS) requirements, bandanas, buffs and gaiters are not acceptable face coverings for use in gyms and fitness centers. Check with the facility for rules regarding face coverings for fully vaccinated people.

Do I need to wear a face covering while at work?
Anyone who is unvaccinated must wear a face covering whenever they may be within 6 feet of distance from others (including co-workers, customers, clients and visitors). Employers can require everyone to wear a face covering, even people who are fully vaccinated. Check with your employer regarding their face covering requirements.

Employers must provide face coverings to employees for free. 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?
NYS requirements for wearing a face covering applies even if you had COVID-19.
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 about the effectiveness of face shields in stopping respiratory droplets from spreading is needed. 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 or change my face covering?
You should wash cloth face coverings regularly. You can wash cloth face coverings by hand or machine using detergent and hot water. The face covering should be fully dry before using.

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 or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer every time you put on and take off your face covering. If you are unable to do so, 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.

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 5.21.21