COVID-19 Face Masks: Frequently Asked Questions

Face masks remain critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19. Everyone must wear a mask in some settings. People who are not vaccinated must wear one whenever they are outside their home and around other people.

Due to the spread of the highly contagious delta variant, we strongly recommend everyone wear a mask whenever they are in a public, indoor setting, even when it is not required, and in any setting when they do not know who around them is vaccinated.

What is a mask and how do they work?
A mask is a well-secured, cloth covering or disposable mask that covers your nose and mouth. Masks:
- 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 mask should I use?
Not all masks provide the same amount of protection. When selecting a mask, consider the following:
- Do not use a mask with an exhalation valve as it allows unfiltered exhaled air to escape.
- Use a mask with two or three layers of material to better prevent unfiltered air from passing through.
- Use masks made of tightly woven fabric (fabrics that do not let light pass through when held up to a light source). Masks should be made of breathable fabric (like cotton) and not leather, plastic or other materials that make it hard to breathe.
- Make sure the mask fits snugly against the sides of your face and fully covers both your nose and mouth without slipping. Masks that fit loosely allow respiratory droplets to enter and leak out. Here are some tips to help ensure a snug fit:
    - Wear a cloth mask over a disposable mask (double-masking).
    - Wear a mask with a nose wire.
    - Wear a mask fitter or brace.
    - Knot the ear loops and fold or tuck extra material.
- People who are age 65 or older, are immunocompromised or have another underlying medical condition that increases their risk of severe COVID-19, especially if they are not fully vaccinated, should consider wearing two masks 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 website.

How do I wear two masks?
Wearing two masks can give you and others added protection by increasing the number of layers of material and making for a snugger fit. If you decide to wear two masks:

- Use one cloth mask and one disposable mask. The disposable mask should be worn underneath and the cloth mask on top.
- Do not use two disposable masks.
- Do not use a mask over or under a KN95 mask. A KN95 mask should be worn alone.

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

If you are **unvaccinated**, you must wear a mask covering:
- Whenever you are in a public space, indoors or outdoors, and cannot maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others. Examples include walking on a busy street, shopping in stores, going to the doctor, 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 do not need to wear a mask outdoors or when gathering with friends and family at home or in other private settings. However, masks are still required:
- When riding public transportation (including taxis and car services).
- When in a school or health care setting.
- In certain group residential facilities, such as nursing homes and homeless shelters.
- When in a store, restaurant or other public space where the owner or operator requires masks.
- At work, if required by your employer.

We strongly recommend that people who are fully vaccinated wear a mask in all other public, indoor settings, even when it is not required, and in any setting when you do not know who around you are vaccinated. Also, people who are fully vaccinated should always wear a mask when sick or around someone who is sick, or if they need to leave home while sick.

If you have a condition or are taking medicines that weaken your immune system, you may not be protected, even if you are fully vaccinated. Continue to take all precautions recommended for people who are unvaccinated, including wearing a mask, until advised otherwise by your health care provider.

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

If you are **unvaccinated**, wear a mask:
- 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 mask 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 mask).

If you are **fully vaccinated**, wear a mask:
- 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 mask 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 mask when you leave your apartment or room. The facility may require masks in shared spaces, even if you are fully vaccinated.

Do children need to wear a mask?
Children over age 2 must wear a mask in the same places adults must wear them. For young children, try to find a smaller mask or one made for children. If you cannot find one, shorten or adjust mask straps to make sure the mask fits snugly. Small children are more likely to touch their mask, so caretakers should wash children's hands or apply hand sanitizer often.

Schools and child care programs have special mask requirements. Please check with your child's school or program.

Do I need to wear a mask while at work?
Anyone who is unvaccinated must wear a mask when interacting with the public or 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 mask, even people who are fully vaccinated. Check with your employer regarding their mask requirements.

Employers must provide masks to employees for free. If you cannot medically tolerate a mask, discuss with your employer if a reasonable accommodation is possible.

I had COVID-19 and am better now. Do I still need to wear a mask?
Yes. The recommendations and requirements for wearing a mask apply even if you had COVID-19.

Can I wear a face shield instead of a mask?
A face shield is not an acceptable substitute for a mask. 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 mask or in addition to wearing a mask. It should not substitute a mask.

How often do I need to wash or change my mask?
You should wash cloth masks regularly. You can wash cloth masks by hand or machine using detergent and hot water. The mask should be fully dry before using. You should discard disposable masks if they become damaged, dirty or wet.

Are there precautions I should take with my mask?
Using masks incorrectly can spread germs. For this reason, it is important to properly wear, store and dispose of masks by doing the following:
- Wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer every time you put on and take off your mask. If you are unable to do so, be very careful not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Do not put masks where others can touch them or where germs trapped in your mask can touch other surfaces, such as countertops or your kitchen table.
- Do not throw your mask loose in a bag or backpack. Keep a small bag with you to store your mask if you will be taking it off when outside your home.
- Throw disposable masks 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.   8.9.21