

HR Insights

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The Importance of Cloth Face Coverings

This article compiles important information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding cloth face coverings. Employers should use this expert guidance to inform their workplace policy decisions. As always, employers must also comply with state and local laws, so they should speak with legal counsel before finalizing any decisions related to mandatory face coverings.

Cloth face coverings are recommended as a simple barrier to help prevent respiratory droplets from traveling into the air and onto other people when the person wearing the cloth face covering coughs, sneezes, talks or raises their voice. This is called source control. This recommendation is based on what we know about the role respiratory droplets play in the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19, paired with emerging evidence from clinical and laboratory studies that show cloth face coverings reduce the spray of droplets when worn over the nose and mouth.

COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), so the use of cloth face coverings is particularly important in settings where people are close to each other or where social distancing is difficult to maintain.

Who Should Wear a Cloth Face Covering?

General Public

In regard to the general public, the CDC recommends the following guidance in regard to cloth face coverings:

- The CDC recommends all people 2 years of age and older wear a cloth face covering in

public settings and when around people who don't live in the same household, especially when other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain.

- COVID-19 can be spread by people who do not have symptoms and do not know that they are infected. That's why it's important for everyone to wear cloth face coverings in public settings and practice social distancing (staying at least 6 feet away from other people).
- While cloth face coverings are strongly encouraged to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the CDC recognizes there are specific instances when wearing a cloth face covering may not be feasible. In these instances, adaptations and alternatives should be considered whenever possible (see below for examples).

People Who Know or Think They Might Have COVID-19

For individuals with a known or suspected case of COVID-19, the CDC recommends:

- If you are sick with COVID-19 or think you might have COVID-19, do not visit public areas. Stay home except to get medical care. As much as possible, stay in a specific room and away from other people and pets in your home. If you need to be around other people or animals, wear a cloth face covering (including in your home).

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The cloth face covering helps prevent a person who is sick from spreading the virus to others. It helps keep respiratory droplets contained and from reaching other people.

Caregivers of People With COVID-19

Those caring for someone who is sick with COVID-19 at home or in a non-health-care setting may also wear a cloth face covering. However, the protective effects—how well the cloth face covering protects healthy people from breathing in the virus—are unknown. To prevent getting sick, caregivers should also continue to practice everyday preventive actions:

- Avoid close contact as much as possible.
- Clean hands often.
- Avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Frequently clean and disinfect surfaces.

Who Should Not Wear a Cloth Face Covering

Cloth face coverings should not be worn by:

- Children younger than 2 years old
- Anyone who has trouble breathing
- Anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the cloth face covering without assistance

Feasibility and Adaptations

The CDC recognizes that wearing cloth face coverings may not be possible in every situation or for some people. In some situations, wearing a cloth face covering may exacerbate a physical or mental health condition, lead to a medical emergency or introduce significant safety concerns.

Adaptations and alternatives should be considered whenever possible to increase the feasibility of wearing a cloth face covering or to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading if it is not possible to wear one.

Examples of when such adaptations may be necessary include:

- People who are deaf or hard of hearing—or those who care for or interact with a person who is hearing-impaired—may be unable to wear cloth face coverings if they rely on lip reading to communicate. In this situation, consider using a clear face covering. If a clear face covering isn't available, consider using

written communication or closed captioning, or decrease background noise to make communication possible while wearing a cloth face covering that blocks the lips.

- Some people, such as people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, mental health conditions or other sensory sensitivities, may have challenges wearing a cloth face covering. They should consult with their health care provider for advice about wearing cloth face coverings.
- Younger children (e.g., those in preschool or early elementary school) may be unable to wear a cloth face covering properly, particularly for an extended period of time. Wearing of cloth face coverings may be prioritized at times when it is difficult to maintain a distance of 6 feet from others (e.g., during carpool drop-off or pickup, or when standing in line at school). Ensuring proper cloth face covering size and fit and providing children with frequent reminders and education on the importance and proper wear of cloth face coverings may help address these issues.
- People should not wear cloth face coverings while engaged in activities that may cause the cloth face covering to become wet, like when swimming at the beach or pool. A wet cloth face covering may make it difficult to breathe. For activities like swimming, it is particularly important to maintain physical distance from others when in the water.
- People who are engaged in high-intensity activities, like running, may not be able to wear a cloth face covering if it causes difficulty breathing. If unable to wear a cloth face covering, consider conducting the activity in a location with greater ventilation and air exchange (for instance, outdoors versus indoors) and where it is possible to maintain a physical distance from others.
- People who work in a setting where cloth face coverings may increase the risk of heat-related illness or cause safety concerns due to introduction of a hazard (for instance, straps getting caught in machinery) may consult with an occupational safety and health professional to determine the appropriate face covering for their setting. Outdoor

workers may prioritize use of cloth face coverings when in close contact with other people, like during group travel or shift meetings, and remove face coverings when social distancing is possible.

Cloth face coverings are a critical preventive measure and are most essential in times when social distancing is difficult. If cloth face coverings cannot be used, make sure to take other measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread, including social distancing, frequent hand-washing, and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces.

Face Shields

It is not known whether face shields provide any benefit as source control to protect others from the spray of respiratory particles. The CDC does not recommend the use of face shields for normal everyday activities or as a substitute for cloth face coverings. Some people may choose to use a face shield when sustained close contact with other people is expected. If face shields are used without a mask, they should wrap around the sides of the wearer's face and extend to below the chin. Disposable face shields should only be worn for a single use. Reusable face shields should be cleaned and disinfected after each use. Plastic face shields for newborns and infants are NOT recommended.

Surgical Masks

Cloth face coverings are not surgical masks or respirators. Currently, those are critical supplies that should continue to be reserved for health care workers and other medical first responders, as recommended by current CDC guidance. Cloth face coverings also are not appropriate substitutes in workplaces where masks or respirators are recommended, or required and available.