

# Occupational Health and Safety COVID-19 Guidelines: Masks and Respirators in Non-healthcare Workplaces

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It is important to wear a clean, well-fitted mask as one of many layers of protection especially given the high transmissibility of the variant of concern, Omicron.

In general, non-healthcare workplaces can follow the same masking guidelines as the general public (<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/masks>). However, there may be non-health care workplaces in which a specific form of masking is required. In these cases, workplaces need to do a risk assessment to determine the best type of mask for their employees to wear. The risk assessment should take into account the environment in which the work is done, the tasks being performed, and the extent of interaction with individuals who are or may be COVID-19 positive.

Both **non-medical masks** composed of 3 layers, two of which are made of a breathable tightly woven fabric such as cotton and one of which is a filter layer, and **medical masks** provide protection against COVID-19. The use of **respirators** by employees need to follow requirements laid out under the Occupational Health and Safety Legislation including the need to have the respirator properly fit the employee (fit-testing). For more detailed information on each type of mask see below.

Face shields on their own do not replace masks. Without a mask, a face shield won't help prevent you or others from being exposed to infectious respiratory particles. These particles come from the nose and mouth that can escape around the face shield. A face shield can be worn in addition to a mask for added eye protection.

## Masks are required for:

- indoor public spaces;
- private indoor workplaces (like offices or warehouses), specifically in the following locations:
  - o all common areas,
  - o places where there's interaction with the public areas with poor ventilation, and
  - o where people can't maintain a minimum physical distance of 2 metres (6 feet) from others.

- For those who have been deemed a close contact (non-household), if you are fully vaccinated, and you have no symptoms, and do not live with the positive case, you are advised to stay at home, with the exception of going to work until you have had a test at least 72 hours after exposure and the result is negative. If your job requires you to go to a work site, then you must wear a properly fitted mask at all times. Eat/drink alone, and distance from others when possible. Follow your work isolation protocols if applicable.

A mask is highly recommended in other areas of the workplace to further reduce the risk of exposure due to unplanned or unexpected close contact with others at the workplace.

### **Ensuring your mask fits properly:**

- More information on how to choose a well-fitted mask can be found at: <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/masks/#choosing>
- An infographic from the Public Health Agency of Canada shows how to make your mask fit well: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-mask-fit-properly/covid-19-mask-fit-properly-en.pdf>

### **Masks (medical and non-medical) vs Respirators – what is the difference?**

#### **Non-Medical Masks:**

The effectiveness of non-medical masks in preventing the spread of COVID-19 can vary based on many factors. It depends on material, construction, fit and proper use. Non-medical masks can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 if they:

- fit well. It is important that you select a mask that allows for a proper fit and covers the mouth, nose, and chin completely without any gaps. A well-fitting mask will not allow air to escape from edges; will fit securely to the head with ties, bands, or ear loops; will be comfortable and not require frequent adjustments.
- have multiple layers, including at least 2 layers of breathable tightly-woven fabric, such as cotton and an effective middle filter layer.

Non-medical masks may be reusable or disposable. They are reusable if washed when dirty or damp.

**Medical masks** are typically worn in healthcare settings and are designed to help prevent contamination of the work environment or a sterile field from large particles generated by the wearer/worker. They may also be used to help reduce the risk of splashes or sprays of blood and body fluids from reaching the wearer's mouth and nose. Medical masks may also be worn by patients or infected persons.

Medical masks can be worn by:

- anyone who has tested positive for or has symptoms of COVID-19
- people caring for someone who has tested positive or has symptoms of COVID-19
- people who live in an overcrowded setting with someone who has tested positive or has symptoms of COVID-19
- people who are at risk of more severe disease or outcomes from COVID-19
- people who are at higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 because of their living situation

Medical masks are commercially available and come in adult and child sizes.

Construction materials may vary but must meet established filtration standards. Some disposable non-medical masks may resemble medical masks but do not meet regulatory standards. Look for a medical mask that has ASTM F2100 or EN 14683 on the box label. This means the mask has been tested and meets international standards for particle and bacterial filtration, breathability, fluid resistance and flammability of materials. There are no Canadian standards for transparent medical masks.

Typically, medical masks are single use but may be reused until visibly dirty, damp, or damaged.

The fit of a medical mask varies depending on the size/features of your face. The fit can be improved by adjusting ties or ear loops and the flexible nosepiece.

**Respirators, such as an N95**, are designed to help reduce the wearer's respiratory exposure to airborne contaminants such as particles, gases, or vapours. Respirators and filters must be selected based on the hazards present. They come in various sizes and styles and should be individually selected to fit the wearer's face and to provide a tight seal. A proper seal between the user's face and the respirator forces inhaled air to be pulled through the respirator's filter material, thereby providing protection. A respirator fit test must be conducted on the wearer with the specific make, model and size prior to initial use of that respirator.

Construction materials may vary but must meet the filtration standards for respirators. The design provides a snug fit that is better than a medical mask (only if properly fitted). As with any mask, the fit can be improved by adjusting ties, bands, ear loops and the nosepiece. It is not available with transparent windows. Respirators are typically used once and then disposed of, but they may be reused until visibly dirty, damp or damaged.

**Respirators with exhalation valves should not be used as they allow unfiltered air to escape and don't protect others or prevent the spread of COVID-19.**

Respirators need to be approved by Health Canada.

## **Respirator requirements**

Requirements for respiratory protection fall under Part 3 of the Occupational Safety General Regulations (OSGR) which state that employers must follow CSA Standard Z94.4 Selection, Use, and Care of Respirators. The standard provides guidance for hazard assessment for bioaerosols which states that Coronavirus in SARS and emerging respiratory infections are transmitted from human to human with possible aerosol generating medical procedures (AGMPs). It is not included in the microorganisms known to be transmitted from human to human by the airborne route and therefore in non-healthcare sector workplaces, respirators are not a required or recommended control for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

If an employer decides to implement a requirement for N95 respirators (or equivalent) they must implement a respiratory protection program that encompasses the requirements set out in the CSA standard including protocols for: Hazard identification, assessment, and control; Selection and use of respirators; Respirator user training; Respirator fit testing; inspecting, cleaning, maintaining, and storing respirators. In addition, the employer shall ensure the individual is medically approved to wear a respirator.

## **Additional Resources:**

More information on the differences between non-medical masks, medical masks, and N95 respirators; as well as details on the proper use and care of masks and respirators can be found at the links below:

Respirators - Respirators Versus Surgical Masks Versus Non-medical Masks  
[https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/ppe/surgical\\_mask.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/ppe/surgical_mask.html)

Respirators - Wearing a Respirator  
<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/ppe/wearing.html>

Get the Facts on Masks <https://www.ccohs.ca/covid19/facts-on-masks>

COVID-19 mask use: Types of masks and respirators  
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/types-masks-respirators.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada: COVID-19 mask use: Types of masks and respirators <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/types-masks-respirators.html>