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Using Masks to Slow the Spread of COVID-19

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The use of face masks is an important tool to help stop the spread of COVID-19. If you're not yet fully vaccinated, you should continue to wear a mask to protect yourself and others who have not yet been vaccinated.

Mask Requirements and Exceptions

- [Fully vaccinated](#) people **do not** have to wear masks or practice physical distancing in most indoor or outdoor settings except where required by federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance.
- Unvaccinated and partially vaccinated people aged 2 years and older should **continue** to wear masks and practice physical distancing in most indoor and outdoor settings in accordance with CDC [recommendations](#).
- Effective July 1, all students, faculty, staff, and visitors aged 5 years and older (regardless of vaccination status) in public and private K-12 **indoor** school settings in Virginia, are required to wear masks as per [Public Health Emergency Order and CDC recommendations](#). This Order will be effective until July 25, 2021.

Exceptions: There are a number of situations when people don't have to wear a mask under this Order. These include:

- While actively eating, drinking or sleeping
- While exercising or using exercise equipment
- When playing a musical instrument and wearing a mask would inhibit the playing of the instrument (e.g., wind or brass instrument) so long as at least six feet of physical distance can be maintained from other persons
- Any person who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance
- Anyone communicating with people who are hearing impaired for which the mouth needs to be visible
- While participating in a religious ritual

- When temporary removal of the mask is necessary to secure government or medical services
- Persons with health conditions or disabilities that prohibit wearing a mask
- All people aged 2 years or older (regardless of vaccination status) **must** wear masks when using public transportation (airplanes, ships, ferries, trains, subways, buses, taxis, and rideshares, as well as in indoor transportation hubs, such as airports and stations), per a [federal order](#)
- Travelers are not required to wear a mask in outdoor areas of a conveyance (like a ferry or top deck of a bus) or while outdoors at transportation hubs. Unvaccinated and partially vaccinated people should continue to wear masks in these areas.
- **Masks should still be worn, regardless of vaccination status, in healthcare settings** (including hospitals, doctor's offices, long-term care facilities, acute care facilities, inpatient rehabilitation facilities, nursing homes and assisted living facilities, home healthcare, vehicles where healthcare is delivered (e.g., mobile clinics), and outpatient facilities, such as dialysis centers). For related information for healthcare settings, visit [Updated Healthcare Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations in Response to COVID-19 Vaccination](#).
- Masks should still be worn, regardless of vaccination status, by all staff, visitors, and people living in correctional or detention facilities and homeless shelters.
- Masks should still be worn, regardless of vaccination status, by all individuals aged 2 years and older in child care settings.

Mask Requirements for Businesses: Employers and employees must follow mask requirements provided in the [Department of Labor and Industry \(DOLI\) Final Permanent Standard](#). See [DOLI's FAQ](#) for additional information on the standard.

Fully vaccinated means 2 weeks or more have passed since getting the second dose of a two-dose vaccine (e.g., Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna), or 2 weeks or more have passed since getting 1 dose of a single-dose vaccine (e.g., Johnson & Johnson [Janssen]). If you have a condition or are taking medications that weaken your immune system, you may NOT be fully protected even if you are fully vaccinated. Talk to your healthcare provider. Even after vaccination, you may need to continue taking all [precautions](#).

You are also considered to be fully vaccinated if you have completed a COVID-19 vaccination series with a vaccine that has been [authorized for emergency use](#) by the World Health Organization (such as AstraZeneca/Oxford). You will not need any additional doses with an FDA-authorized COVID-19 vaccine.

Masks for children: Although the [Public Health Emergency Order](#) applies to K-12 students aged 5 years and older, CDC still recommends that all individuals aged 2 years or older wear a mask if not yet fully vaccinated. Adults should use their best judgement in putting face masks on children aged 2-4 while inside public areas or when outdoors and within 6 feet of others who do not live with them. Masks should **not** be worn by children under the age of 2 years. For children aged 2 years or older, find a mask made for children, if possible.

How masks can help protect all of us

Protect others. Many people with COVID-19 have no signs or symptoms and can pass the virus to others without knowing it. When we talk, sneeze, sing, cough, or breathe, tiny droplets and aerosol particles that contain the virus can be carried into the air. Infections occur mainly through exposure to these droplets and particles when a person is in [close contact](#) with someone who has COVID-19.

These droplets and particles can sometimes remain in the air for minutes to hours. In closed spaces with poor ventilation (not a lot of fresh air coming in), there is evidence that people with COVID-19 seem to have infected others who were more than 6 feet away. Wearing a mask helps stop droplets from going into the air or landing on surfaces.

If you are sick with COVID-19 or think you may have COVID-19, wear a mask when you need to be around other people or animals, even in your own home.

Protect yourself. [Masks help reduce breathing in droplets that contain the virus](#). Masks with multiple layers of cloth with higher thread counts will protect you better than single layers of cloth with lower thread counts. If you are not fully vaccinated, you should always wear a mask when caring for someone who has COVID-19 to help keep you from getting sick. For better fit and extra protection, you can wear two masks: a disposable mask underneath **and** a cloth mask on top. You can also wear a cloth mask with a [fitter or a brace](#) for a better fit.

Better fit and protection is especially recommended for these situations:

- When using public transportation, especially when you can't keep [at least 6 feet away](#) from people who don't live with you;
- When [taking care of someone](#) who is sick with COVID-19;
- When [working at a job](#) where you interact with large numbers of the public (for example bus drivers and grocery store workers), and
- If you are [at increased risk for severe illness, for example, older adults or people with certain underlying medical conditions](#).

Tips for selecting, wearing and making masks

VDH supports current [CDC recommendations](#) for what to look for when selecting a mask.

- Fits snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
- Completely covers the nose and mouth
- Includes two or more layers of fabric
- Is secured with ties or ear loops
- Has a nose wire
- Blocks light when held up to a bright light source
- Allows for breathing without restriction
- Can be washed and machine dried without damage or change to shape

DO choose masks that



Have two or more layers of washable, breathable fabric



Completely cover your nose and mouth



Fit snugly against the sides of your face and don't have gaps

DO NOT choose masks that



Are made of fabric that makes it hard to breathe, for example, vinyl



Have exhalation valves or vents, which allow virus particles to escape



Cover your mouth AND nose with your mask. COVID-19 is spread primarily through droplets and aerosol particles from your nose and mouth. Covering your nose and mouth helps to prevent the spread of the virus to others. It is possible to be infected with COVID-19 if you breathe in the virus through your nose. Do not put the mask around your neck, on your forehead, under or only on your nose, or on your chin.



Use a Mask that Fits Your Face. People come in all shapes and sizes and that includes our heads and faces. If your mask keeps falling down below your nose, you should look for a smaller mask or make knots in the ear loops so that it fits more snugly. You want to avoid having to keep touching your mask to get it back in place.

Double Masking or Wearing a “Double Mask”. One way to make sure your mask fits better and provides extra protection is to wear **two masks**: a disposable mask underneath and a cloth mask on top. A cloth mask can also be worn with a **fitter** or a **brace** for a better fit. Do not wear two disposable masks together to create a “double mask”. If you use a KN95 mask, you should also wear it alone and not with other masks. A [recent CDC report](#) showed that wearing a cloth mask over a medical procedure mask provided more protection to the person wearing the masks and more protection to others (source control).



Knot and Tuck Ear Loops. Another way to have better fit and extra protection when wearing a 3-ply mask is to knot and tuck ear loops where they join the edge of the mask. Fold and tuck the unneeded material under the edges. Watch a video on how to do this [here](#).



Masks are only one part of the solution. Masks are only helpful when they are worn correctly and used with other recommendations. Don't get a false sense of security from wearing a mask. If you are not fully vaccinated, you should still follow physical distancing rules (limiting contact and staying 6 feet away from other people), wash your hands often, avoid touching your face, and cover your coughs and sneezes.

What if I don't have a mask? Simple steps for making a mask with everyday items from your home can be found [here](#). Instructions for creating a clear view mask can be found [here](#).

Face shields are not a substitute for a mask. Face shields are primarily used to protect the eyes of the person wearing them and may be used in addition to wearing a mask.

Scarves and other cold weather headwear are not a substitute for a mask. Items like scarves, ski masks and balaclavas used for warmth are usually made of loosely knit fabrics that are not suitable for use as masks to prevent COVID-19 transmission. They can be worn over a mask.

Wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) before putting on a mask. Cover your mouth and nose with the mask. Make sure there are no gaps between your face and the mask. Be aware that if you touch your face or adjust your mask after you have touched other objects, you can easily spread germs to your face. If you do touch your face or mask, you should wash your hands or use hand sanitizer right away.

Be careful when taking off your mask. Remove it from behind the ears and try not to touch the front of the mask or your face. Once you remove the mask, you should throw it in the trash (if it's disposable) right away or put it in the [laundry](#). Be careful not to touch your eyes, nose, and mouth when removing, and wash your hands right away.



Please do not buy N95 respirator masks or other medical face masks, unless required for your job. They are in short supply and are needed by the medical staff and first responders who are caring for sick people.

If you are using a KN95 mask, make sure it meets CDC [requirements](#) and is not a [fake](#). About 60% of KN95 masks in the United States are fake and DO NOT meet requirements. You should also not wear a KN95 mask if it is hard to breathe or if you have certain types of facial hair. You should not wear a KN95 mask with other masks (double masking); wear KN95 masks alone only.

Masks with one-way exhalation valves or vents are not recommended. The purpose of masks is to keep respiratory droplets belonging to the person wearing the mask from reaching others. Masks with one-way valves or vents allow exhaled air to go out through holes in the material. This can allow exhaled respiratory droplets to reach others and could spread the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, VDH does not recommend using masks if they have an exhalation valve or vent.

For people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, such as anxiety, or other sensory sensitivities, it may feel scary or challenging to wear a mask. Talk with your healthcare provider for advice on how to wear a mask. It may also be helpful to practice wearing a mask at home for short time periods and taking breaks if you feel anxious. Practicing at home first may help you adjust to wearing a mask in public settings. Taking slow, deep breaths may also help reduce anxiety or stress from wearing a mask.

If you are sick, stay home and separate yourself from others in your home. Wear a mask over your nose and mouth if you must be around other people, even at home. If you need medical care, call ahead and tell them you have or may have COVID-19. For more information, see VDH's [If You're Sick](#) site.

For More Information:

- See the [Public Health Emergency Order](#) for more information on the requirement to wear masks.
- Read VDH's [FAQs](#) and search for "mask"
- Call VDH COVID-19 hotline at 877-ASK-VDH3 (877-275-8343).
- Refer to [CDC's website on masks](#).
- View images from [How to Select, Wear and Clean Your Mask](#) and [Improve How Your Mask Protects You](#) courtesy of CDC.

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