

# Neck Gaiters Are Stylish, But How Effective Are They in Stopping COVID-19 Spread?

Experts say how a neck gaiter is made and what material is used determines how effective the face coverings are against the novel coronavirus. Getty Images

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- Researchers say certain types of neck gaiter face coverings aren't effective in stopping the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.
- Gaiters made of cotton and triple layered are the most effective according to experts.
- They add that whatever face covering you wear, it's still important to maintain physical distancing and to avoid mass gatherings.

Neck gaiters can provide a comfortable and stylish way for people to cover their faces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

But that doesn't mean they are effectively protecting against the spread of the novel coronavirus.

In a new study from Duke University in North Carolina, researchers concluded that fleece neck gaiters made from a polyester and spandex blend aren't effective in blocking coronavirus droplets.

These respiratory droplets are transmitted when we talk, cough, sing, sneeze, and yawn, say experts.

Since they didn't test other types, the researchers say we shouldn't apply these findings to all neck gaiters on the market.

Experts agree.

“There is nothing wrong with neck gaiters being used as face coverings,” said Dr. Mitchell H. Grayson, the director of the Division of Allergy and Immunology at Nationwide Children’s Hospital in Ohio.

Grayson is also a tenured professor at The Ohio State University School of Medicine in the Department of Pediatrics, Division of Allergy and Immunology, as well as a fellow of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

“The problem is the material of which they are made,” he told [name removed].

## **What to look for in a neck gaiter**

“I wear a neck gaiter, but it’s not made out of polyester,” said Ravina Kullar, PharmD, MPH, FIDSA, a leading expert in infectious diseases.

“It’s made out of cotton and it’s triple layered as well. So that’s the material that would be effective,” Kullar told [name removed].

She added that whichever face covering you choose, it should fit your nose and be snug under your chin.

For Grayson, an important issue is making sure you can't see daylight through the mask when you hold it up to light.

"I recommend a material that does not have a large enough space between the fibers to allow virus particles to easily pass through," he said.

"If you do see daylight, then it is likely that the mask will not perform well in preventing viral spread."

He added, "In most cases, a cloth (cotton) mask with several layers is fine, as are surgical/procedure masks, if you can get them."

Grayson also noted that N95 masks with valves aren't acceptable. "These masks only protect the wearer, and the virus will be expelled through the valve."

However, he said he doesn't believe that all valve-containing masks are a problem. Again, it comes down to the specifics of each type.

"There are some cotton masks with multiple cotton layers (and even a removable P2.5 filter) that have a valve attached to the outside layer of fabric," Grayson said.

"In most of these I've seen the valve doesn't actually work (if you exhale strongly while wearing the mask, the air doesn't go out the valve, it just comes out around the mask)," he added.

"Since any air that would come out of the valve would have gone through all of the layers of fabric, the likelihood of the virus escaping through the valve is minimal (beyond what would normally escape through the fabric)."

But in general, Grayson advises avoiding valve-containing masks.

## **Safety is about more than masks**

Kullar said it's clear some people are forgetting that we are still in a health crisis.

But the coronavirus doesn't care about pandemic fatigue.

"There have been so many reports that people have had mass gatherings, and have not had [safety] measures in place, and there have been outbreaks," she said. "Do not have mass gatherings."

Kullar defines a mass gathering as any more than 10 people.

"And keep that physical distance," she added.

Kullar noted a recent study from the University of Florida showed virus particles can travel as far as 7 to 16 feet.

This is beyond the 6 feet of physical distancing currently recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“And with wind, the particles might travel, and it might cause the particles to travel toward you, and it might also cause the particles to potentially be spread a lot farther than in the indoor setting,” said Kullar.

This means safety precautions are necessary even in outdoor settings.

Grayson mentioned the same study, adding that whenever he is outdoors, he either avoids physical interactions within 20 feet or wears a face covering.

“This may be overkill, and 6 feet is probably sufficient. But there is some data suggesting the ability for droplets to travel farther, so I’m extra cautious,” he said.

“I view this as being kind to others. If there is a chance my droplets might be inhaled by them, I will wear a mask to lessen that chance,” Grayson added.

Finally, Kullar says you need to wash your face coverings daily with warm water and soap or put them in the washer and dryer.

“Also, how you are removing and putting on the mask is just as important,” says Kullar. “You need to make sure you wash your hands before you do that and make sure you know it’s clean hands you’re removing it with.”