COVID-19 Respiratory Protection Guidelines for All Employees

What you need to know regarding respiratory protection and COVID-19. COVID-19 spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Infection control reports show that these droplets can travel around 6 feet (about two arms lengths). COVID-19 also spreads by direct contact, which is why frequent handwashing is so important.

Protecting your respiratory system and others using cloth masks (face coverings), surgical masks, or N95 respirators are just one facet of a larger infection control program. In addition to these devices, social distancing, cleaning and disinfection, personal hygiene, PPE, training, etc. should be used as applicable to minimize and control the potential for COVID-19 infection.

Why respiratory protection is important. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain. COVID-19 can be spread by people who do not have symptoms (they are “asymptomatic”) and do not know that they are infected. That’s why it’s important for everyone to practice social distancing (staying at least 6 feet away from other people) and wear cloth face coverings in public settings. Cloth face coverings provide an extra layer to help prevent respiratory droplets from traveling in the air and onto other people.

Why wear a cloth face mask? Wearing a cloth face covering helps to protect everyone. Employees may need to be in relatively close contact with others, and it is possible that simple interactions such as talking may put others at risk. Use of these materials and devices to shield the nose and mouth during these face-to-face interactions may reduce this risk. In addition, use of a face mask helps prevent transmission of the virus from the user to others nearby.

To be effective, the mask should fit well around the mouth and nose without gaps at the sides and should be comfortable enough for the user to be willing to keep it on. Masks should be made of soft, tight-weave fabric. A cotton or cotton-polyester mix is a reasonable choice for materials. Users should avoid touching the mask while in use and should wash their hands or use hand sanitizer before and after removing or adjusting the mask.

Who wears an N95 respirator or surgical mask? City employees interacting with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 positive individuals. This includes those providing Healthcare, Public Safety (Police, Fire, EMS), detention services, and others at high risk. These groups have their own procedures for this application.

What are N95s and who currently has a need for them? N95 respirators are particulate air purifying respirators that remove particles from the air down to a specified size. Due to an international scarcity, these devices are in short supply. They must continue to be reserved for healthcare employees and other responders as recommended by current CDC guidance. Additionally, individuals wearing N95 respirators must be in a proper Respiratory Protection Program (which includes medical clearance, fit testing, and training).
Putting on (donning) a cloth face mask:
- Wash your hands before putting on your face covering.
- Put it over your nose and mouth and secure it under your chin.
- If it has ear loops, place one loop around each ear.
- If it has ties, tie one set on the crown of the head, and the other set around the back of the neck.
- Try to fit the mask snugly against the sides of your face. Make sure that straps secure to avoid slippage. Make sure you can breathe easily.
- Avoid touching the front of the mask while it is being worn to prevent potential infection.

Take off (doffing) your cloth face covering carefully:
- Untie the strings behind your head or stretch the ear loops.
- Handle it only by the ear loops or ties (not the front).
- Fold the outside corners together and place in a paper bag.
- Be careful not to touch your eyes, nose, and mouth when removing it and wash the hands immediately after removing.

Maintenance: Clean the cloth face mask on a daily basis. Alternatively, you may choose to utilize any approved personal face coverings while the other is being cleaned. N95s can be kept in a paper bag and stored in a manner that avoids crushing or damaging the respirator. When an N95 is dirty, damaged, or difficult to breathe through, discard it in an appropriate waste container.

Laundering Cloth Face Coverings in a Washing Machine:
- The cloth face covering can be included with regular laundry.
- Use regular laundry detergent and the warmest appropriate water setting for the cloth used to make the face covering.

Washing Cloth Face Coverings by Hand:
- Prepare a bleach solution by mixing:
  - 5 tablespoons (1/3rd cup) household bleach per gallon of room temperature water or 4 teaspoons household bleach per quart of room temperature water.
- Check the label to see if your bleach is intended for disinfection. Some bleach products, such as those designed for safe use on colored clothing, may not be suitable for disinfection. Ensure the bleach product is not past its expiration date. **Never** mix household bleach with ammonia or any other cleanser as it can create toxic or flammable gases or deactivate one or both products.
- Soak the face covering in the bleach solution for 5 minutes.
- Rinse thoroughly with cool or room temperature water.

How to dry: Make sure that the face covering is dried after washing. **When using an automatic machine dryer**, use the highest heat setting and leave it in the dryer until completely dry. **When air drying**, hang it up (or lay it flat) and allow it to completely dry. If possible, place the cloth face covering in direct sunlight.

Method to order cloth face masks or personal protective equipment (PPE) associated with COVID-19:
All requests for cloth masks or PPE should be directed to the departmental Safety Officer. The Safety Officer should send the department’s consolidated request for supplies to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) via email, with a copy to their Risk Management Safety Liaison. The request should contain information about the type and quantity of supplies needed and the workers’ potential COVID-19 exposures.