



Infection Prevention and Control Expert Group – Guidance on Community Face Mask Use

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The Infection Prevention and Control Expert Group (ICEG) provides expert advice and information to support best practice for infection prevention and control in community, hospital, and institutional settings.

This guidance was developed by ICEG and provides guidance for the community on the use of face masks and respirators in the context of COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its variants.

ICEG has reviewed current evidence regarding the greater transmissibility of Omicron compared with earlier COVID-19 variants including Delta. ICEG considers that the same principles of protection that apply to COVID-19 and its other variants of concern continue to apply in the context of Omicron.

Key Recommendation

Masks offer protection to yourself and others when other protective measures like physical distancing are difficult to maintain (e.g., on public transport). ICEG recommends the use of surgical masks or well-fitting, triple-layered cloth masks for the general public to reduce transmission of COVID-19 and its variants.

Background

Transmission of COVID-19

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, can be spread between through exhaled infectious particles, and contact with contaminated surfaces. People with or without symptoms who are infected with COVID-19 can be infectious and transmit COVID-19 to others. The risk of transmission of COVID-19 is greatest when a person is close to an infectious source and is exposed to a large concentration of exhaled infectious particles.

Factors that increase risk of COVID-19 transmission include prolonged or close contact with an infectious person, poorly ventilated indoor enclosed spaces, and by uncleaned, shared surfaces and objects. People who are immunocompromised, unvaccinated or have no past history of COVID-19 may also have an increased risk of acquisition due to lack of immunity.

Reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19

You can reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread through preventative measures including:

- staying up to date with COVID-19 vaccinations
- testing if symptoms develop
- staying home if you are unwell
- maintaining physical distancing of 1.5 metres where possible
- minimising crowded indoor spaces
- doing more of your social activities outdoors
- ensuring effective ventilation
- respiratory etiquette, e.g., cough into a tissue or elbow, and clean your hands after using a tissue.

Face masks can provide additional protection, particularly when measures like physical distancing are difficult to maintain (e.g., on public transport). The effectiveness of face masks depends on consistent and correct use.

A face mask is designed to contain the particles that are breathed, coughed, or sneezed out. A well-fitting mask reduces the risk of exposure to others by containing exhaled particles from someone who is infected. This is called source control. If they fit closely to the face, they can also provide you some protection from inhaling particles spread by others, including the virus that causes COVID-19.

Face Masks (cloth or surgical)

ICEG recommends the use of surgical masks (sometimes called ‘medical masks’) or well-fitting, triple-layered cloth masks for use by the general public to reduce transmission of COVID-19 and its variants.

Many different cloth masks are available and can be made from a variety of different fabrics. Wear cloth masks that are made of tightly woven, breathable fabric that blocks light when held up to bright light source. Cloth masks are reusable but must be washed after use.

Single-use surgical masks may be worn with up to four hours of continuous use.

Do not re-use single-use masks, and always dispose in a bin after use.

How to wear your mask

To ensure your mask is effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19, including Omicron and other variants, it should be correctly fitted to your face: covering the nose, mouth, and chin, and adjusted to fit the bridge of the nose. Gaps between the face and the mask should be minimised.

Masks are considered contaminated once they have been worn. Avoid touching your mask while you are wearing it. If you touch or remove your mask, wash your hands, or apply hand sanitiser. To readjust your mask, always use the straps rather than touching the front of the mask itself.

When removing your mask, avoid touching the front of the mask and handle it by the straps. In between uses, do not store your mask around your arm, wrist, or pull it down to rest over your chin or neck. Do not share masks that have been worn.

How to clean your cloth mask

After using a cloth mask, you should place it in a clean plastic resealable bag until it can be washed. Wash cloth masks after each use, or daily at a minimum. Surgical masks should not be re-used.

Particulate filter respirators (P2/ N95 or equivalent)

Particulate filter respirators (PFRs), including P2, N95 or equivalent, work by filtering the air and particles. They work best when worn with a tight seal to the face.

There are a variety of PFRs available in the community. Make sure you choose a PFR without an exhalation valve, as these can allow infectious particles to escape.

Currently, there is limited evidence to suggest PFRs provide additional benefit for most people wearing them in the community. However, there are situations when you may choose to wear a PFR, for example, to protect yourself when looking after a high-risk individual or to protect others as an essential worker who has been identified as a high-risk contact.

In workplace settings, risk assessments should be undertaken to identify the level of risk and identify which type of mask or PFR is most suitable.

For guidance on PFR use in the workplace, refer to the ICEG guidance on the use of [Personal Protective Equipment for Health Workers](#).

How to effectively wear a PFR

When wearing a PFR, it is important to choose one with the best fit and seal around your face. To ensure it is effective, you should check to ensure there are no leaks in the seal between the face and PFR every time you apply it to your face. Breathe in and out, feeling

around the edges of the PFR to check if air is escaping from the sides, particularly near your eyes. Make sure you refer to your specific PFR's instructions for use. If you feel a leak, adjust, and try again. If you are unable to achieve a seal, try a different size or style of PFR.

A PFR is designed for single use, replace your PFR if it becomes damp or soiled at any time. PFRs are less effective when used by people with facial hair, as this breaks the seal. PFRs also do not fit well on the faces of young children. If you are unable to tolerate wearing a PFR, revert to using a surgical mask.

About ICEG

ICEG advice represents a broad consensus among experts across a diverse range of fields, including infection prevention and control, infectious disease, pathology, primary care, nursing care, emergency care, critical care, care of older people, occupational and environmental health.

Further ICEG guidance on face masks, personal protective equipment and other infection prevention and control measures can be found on the [Department website](#).

ICEG will continue to review its published guidance to ensure it aligns to the latest evidence and expert advice.