





ACOEM Recommendations for Use of Cloth or Disposable Face Coverings in the Workplace During COVID-19

First detected last year, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has now spread throughout the world and is found in all 50 states and in territories of the United States (U.S.). To help prevent or slow the spread of this disease, public health authorities have mandated social distancing, handwashing, and disinfection of surfaces as the key infection control techniques. Recent evidence that asymptomatic carriers of the virus can infect others, has also led the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Surgeon General to urge the use of face coverings in areas with significant transmission.

Many employees have jobs that require their physical presence at work during this pandemic including, but not limited to, public safety personnel, grocery store workers, delivery drivers, utility workers, pharmacists, etc.¹ Based on the new federal recommendations, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM) encourages the use of face coverings in the workplace where respirators have not historically been indicated.² The following checklist summarizes best practices for the use of face coverings to maximize safety and stop the spread of COVID-19 to co-workers, family members, and the public.

As the science surrounding COVID-19 is rapidly changing, look to CDC and ACOEM for regular updates.

ACTION AREAS	EMPLOYERS	EMPLOYEES
<p>WHY WEAR A FACE COVERING? <i>A significant portion of people with COVID-19 lack symptoms, but can transmit the virus to others. COVID-19 can spread between people interacting in close proximity – breathing and talking, not just coughing and sneezing.</i></p> <p><i>Face coverings protect others by catching the spray of droplets, and may also help prevent touching the face with contaminated hands, one way the virus is transmitted.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Provide workers with up-to-date education and training on COVID-19 risk factors and how and why to use protective behaviors/barriers (e.g., cough etiquette and care of face coverings). Training material should be clear and available in the appropriate language. <input type="checkbox"/> Display signs that provide instructions on how to select and use face coverings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If you have any COVID-19 symptoms, STAY HOME; contact your physician and employer. Practice infection control at home to avoid exposing others. <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain social distancing at work – at least 6 feet from co-workers and others. Do not congregate in groups. <input type="checkbox"/> Wash your hands frequently. <input type="checkbox"/> Disinfect high-touch surfaces as per your employer’s instructions. <input type="checkbox"/> Wear face covering if working with colleagues who cannot maintain social distance or if dealing with the public and in public spaces. Assume everyone is infected, even if they don’t exhibit symptoms or if they say they feel well. <input type="checkbox"/> If your employer does not provide a face covering, request permission to wear one of your own choice.

<p>CHOICE OF FACE COVERING</p> <p><i>It is not known if certain types of face coverings (bandanas, homemade masks, disposable dust-filtering masks, etc.), are better than others in non-health-care settings, but it is likely the type of material and tightness of fit makes a difference. Consider washable multilayer, pleated cotton (but breathable) materials unless disposable face coverings are used.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Do not purchase surgical masks or N95s.² <input type="checkbox"/> Offer, permit, and encourage employees whose job tasks do not require respirators to use face coverings that are not NIOSH certified and do not meet criteria of a respirator. Examples: <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;">   </div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Recognize that some workers may not tolerate a face covering due to discomfort, claustrophobia, irritation, or difficulty breathing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> A face covering is not intended to be used as respiratory protection for the wearer. <input type="checkbox"/> Disposable face coverings may be purchased online. Cloth face coverings can be made at home. Here are two examples: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html 2. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/DIY-cloth-face-covering-instructions.pdf <input type="checkbox"/> Face coverings must not be shared. <input type="checkbox"/> Read and follow instructions provided by the manufacturer when applicable.
<p>HOW TO PUT ON A FACE COVERING SAFELY</p> <p><i>Whether using a homemade face covering or bandana or a manufactured disposable dust-filtering mask (see examples above), improperly donning a face covering will reduce its effectiveness and increase the likelihood of viral transmission.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Display signs that provide instructions on how to put face coverings on safely. <input type="checkbox"/> Provide adequate facilities for hand washing. If available, consider alcohol-based hand sanitizers as an alternative to soap and water as appropriate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Wash your hands before putting on any face covering. <input type="checkbox"/> If using a disposable covering, inspect to assure neither the strap nor facepiece has degraded. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Place covering over nose and mouth. Make sure correct side is facing out. If covering has a metal piece, shape top edge to the bridge of your nose. 2. Secure top strings or elastics behind your head and above your ears and bottom strings below your ears. Fit covering as tightly as possible while being able to breath comfortably. <input type="checkbox"/> No matter what type of covering you are using, once you have the covering on, do NOT touch the front.
<p>WEARING A FACE COVERING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Display signs that provide instructions on how to safely use face coverings. <input type="checkbox"/> Assure adequate availability of hand sanitizer or soap and water in areas where employees will be putting on and removing face coverings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Before using and after removing face coverings, immediately wash your hands. While wearing covering, don't touch mouth, nose, and eyes. Avoid touching face covering. <input type="checkbox"/> Keep covering in its original location over your mouth and nose until you are ready to remove it.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If covering becomes dislodged and no longer covers your mouth and nose, follow instructions on how to remove it. <input type="checkbox"/> If covering will be used for prolonged periods, chance of contamination increases. Therefore, remove it if it is dislodged, wet, intolerable, or if using the restroom. Follow instructions for safe removal/re-use.
<p>REMOVING A FACE COVERING SAFELY <i>Improperly removing a face covering will increase the likelihood of viral transmission.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Display signs that provide instructions about how to remove face coverings safely. <input type="checkbox"/> Assure adequate availability of hand sanitizer or soap and water where employees will be putting on and removing face coverings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> WASH YOUR HANDS! Use soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not touch front of face covering. Remove by grasping from back of head. <input type="checkbox"/> Grasp the bottom ties or elastic, then the ones at the top and remove without touching the face covering. <input type="checkbox"/> If discarding, drop face covering in a plastic trash bag. If it will be re-used, see re-use instructions. <input type="checkbox"/> WASH YOUR HANDS! Use soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
<p>REUSE OF CLOTH FACE COVERINGS <i>Cloth face coverings can be decontaminated through laundering. However, over time, washing will likely degrade whatever protective effect the covering may have had.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If you are providing re-usable cloth face coverings to employees, assure they are instructed in proper approach for re-use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Follow instructions for putting on and removing the face covering. Place covering in a sealable plastic bag. <input type="checkbox"/> Do not reuse until laundered. <input type="checkbox"/> Empty bag contents into washing machine or washtub; use detergent and water as hot as material will tolerate. <input type="checkbox"/> Dry face covering in a dryer. <input type="checkbox"/> Face covering is now ready for reuse.
<p>EXTENDED USE AND REUSE OF DISPOSABLE FACE COVERINGS <i>Ideally, if in sufficient supply, disposable filtering masks should not be reused and should be safely discarded.³</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If a disposable face covering will be re-used, reserve it for a single individual identified by name on face covering. Provide paper bags (NOT PLASTIC) for storage. <input type="checkbox"/> Instruct employees that for extended use over one work shift, the same disposable face covering may be used with attention to instructions for re-use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> If sufficient supplies or if wet, damaged, or visibly dirty, discard face covering in a plastic trash bag after use. <input type="checkbox"/> If reusing the disposable face covering, write your name and day of the week on the covering with indelible ink and on the paper bag before its first use. <input type="checkbox"/> Follow instructions for safely putting on/removing covering during work breaks, eating, smoking, or using the restroom.

<p><i>The surfaces of a face covering may be contaminated and could transfer virus to the wearer upon contact with it during activities such as adjusting, improper doffing or when redonning a previously worn face covering.</i>⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> For breaks in use, instruct workers to follow instructions for re-using the disposable face coverings during the same day. <input type="checkbox"/> If the disposable face covering will be reused over multiple shifts, issue each worker a minimum of one disposable covering and small paper bag for its storage, for each work shift per week.⁵ If it is not possible to provide 5 disposable coverings, a better alternative is to use washable ones. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> After removing, place in labelled paper bag. <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid touching inside of the covering. If contact is made with the inside, discard covering and wash your hands. <input type="checkbox"/> If the disposable covering will be re-used over multiple shifts, at the end of the shift, drop it in a paper bag labelled with your name/day of the week. Rotate disposable coverings each day of a work week; leave at least 4 days between each use for virus to die.
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1. CISA. Department of Homeland Security. *Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: Ensuring Community and National Resilience in COVID-19 Response Version 2.0*. March 28, 2020. Available at: https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CISA_Guidance_on_the_Essential_Critical_Infrastructure_Workforce_Version_2.0_Updated.pdf.
2. This guidance does not apply to health care workers or those whose jobs normally require use of respirators. ACOEM directs this advice to employers who permit, offer, or require cloth or disposable face coverings, potentially for prolonged period of time. Commercial and homemade disposable or cloth face coverings are not respirators. Respirators, such as N95s, are certified by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to protect the person wearing them. Their use is regulated by OSHA and requires that employers put in place a Respiratory Protection Program with many elements (Standard 1910.134) see https://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_id=12716&p_table=STANDARDS. **Because of insufficient supplies of N95 respirators to protect health care workers, employers should not purchase these for their workers who are at much lower risk of exposure.** This guidance is also offered in the context of a pandemic where there is a crisis in supplies of personal protective equipment, including disposable or reusable face coverings that do not meet the criteria of a respirator.
3. CDC has issued *Strategies for Optimizing the Supply of N95 Respirators* that can be referenced for guidance about the reuse of disposable filtering masks. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirators-strategy/index.html>.
4. NIOSH (<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hcwcontrols/recommendedguidanceextuse.html>) an effective strategy to reduce the transfer of the virus from the disposable face covering to the wearer.
5. This guidance is based on studies that indicate that virus contamination diminishes to negligible amounts over 3 days.

About ACOEM

Founded in 1916, the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (www.acoem.org) is an international society of 4,000 occupational physicians and other health care professionals. The College provides leadership to promote optimal health and safety of workers, workplaces, and environments. The College is located in Elk Grove Village, Illinois.

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