Return to Research Activity in Lab or Research Spaces: Use of Face Coverings and Respiratory Protection

What is considered a face covering?

Any of the face coverings described below are acceptable for use as face coverings for workers in research labs or settings. Although the Governor of Virginia's Executive Order Number 63 includes bandanas as a usable face covering, coverings that fit close to the face with no loose edges are the safest choice to use in labs/research spaces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disposable dust mask:</th>
<th>Disposable pleated mask (nonmedical-grade):</th>
<th>Reusable cloth mask:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Typically has only one strap but may have two.</td>
<td>• Typically has two straps that either go around your ears or that go behind your head.</td>
<td>• Typically has two straps that go around your ears, or may tie behind your head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Manufactured.</td>
<td>• Manufactured.</td>
<td>• Manufactured or handmade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Typically used for protection from breathing in sawdust, etc.</td>
<td>• Typically used for protection from breathing in household allergens, pollen, etc.</td>
<td>• Should have several layers of fabric for added filtration.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Washable; resusable.</td>
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</table>
Why wear face coverings at work?

Wearing a face covering helps protect the people around you from potential coronavirus exposure when you wear a face covering. When they wear face coverings, it helps protect you from potential exposure to the coronavirus. This is because some people with COVID-19 have no signs or symptoms and do not feel sick (or may not yet feel sick with symptoms) but can still pass the virus on to others. Wearing face coverings can help prevent viral spread by containing most of the respiratory droplets we produce when we speak, cough, sneeze, and laugh. You don't need to be fitted or specially trained to wear a face covering.

What protection does a face covering provide to the person wearing it?

Face coverings are not respirators. They do not protect the wearer from exposure to the coronavirus, so it is important that you don’t get a false sense of security from wearing a face covering. You should still follow physical distancing rules when wearing a face covering (limiting contact and staying 10 feet away from others), wash your hands often, and avoid touching your face to lessen your chances of exposure.

Why not wear respirators or medical-grade surgical masks for COVID-19 protection?

These personal protective equipment (PPE) items are in short supply. We can do our part to control COVID-19 by using face coverings so the limited supply of respiratory PPE can be provided to those who most need it in health care settings.

Must everyone working in the lab/research space wear a face covering? Are there any exceptions?

Face coverings (or respiratory protection as needed for a specific hazard) must be worn by employees at all times while in labs/research spaces to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. However, anyone with a medical condition for whom wearing a face covering is not recommended by their medical provider, anyone who has trouble breathing, or anyone who would be at increased risk by wearing a face covering (such as performing a procedure with a flammable material) is exempted and should speak with their supervisor.

Will face coverings be provided for lab/research workers?

It is recommended that lab/research workers obtain the type of face covering that provides a comfortable good fit before they return to work in the lab/research space. Some departments may
provide face coverings, but such provision could be made difficult due to shortages. Because cloth face coverings are washable, reusable, and inexpensive to make, they are recommended. Visit this link for guidance in making your own cloth face covering.

**Can I wear the same face covering when going to the lab, working in the lab, and leaving the lab?**

Yes, provided it has not become contaminated with hazardous materials used in the lab, torn, or otherwise damaged. Cloth face coverings should be washed and dried at home after a day's wear. If they must be reused due to shortages, see guidance around cleaning below.

**How could I contaminate my face covering while working in the lab?**

You are likely to contaminate your mask with germs when you touch your mask with gloved or ungloved hands. Try to avoid touching your face covering while you are wearing it. In the event your cloth face covering becomes contaminated at work, please replace it with a back-up face covering and wash the contaminated mask when you get home. Replace a contaminated disposable face covering with a fresh one as soon as you can. In some cases, a face shield could be used to protect your face covering from contamination.

**What is the right way to put on a face covering and have it fit properly?**

1. Wash hands prior to touching face covering. Handle the face covering by straps only.
2. Make sure it fully covers the mouth and nose at all times.
3. Adjust until it fit snugly but comfortably against the sides of your face and over your nose.
4. Make sure it is secured in place using ties or ear loops to prevent slipping.
5. Make sure you have no difficulty breathing with the face covering in place.

**How do I remove my face covering properly?**

1. Wash hands prior to touching face covering. Handle the mask by straps only.
2. Avoid touching your face when removing; also avoid touching the outer surface of the mask.
3. Put the mask in a labeled paper bag to store for re-use, or to take home to wash (if cloth mask).
4. Wash hands immediately after removing.

**What if I want to remove my face covering temporarily, like for a lunch break?**

- Do not slide your face covering onto your forehead, let it hang on one ear, or hang under your
• Instead, remove it completely; handle by the straps only and avoid touching the face covering itself.
• Put the face covering in a paper bag with your name on it, or place it in a secure location where it can air out until you are ready to put it on again; do not put your mask in a closed plastic bag or container that will trap moisture.
• When you are ready to wear your face covering again, make sure the outer surface is facing out before you put it on. Follow the steps listed above for putting on a clean face covering, including washing your hands.

How do I clean my face covering?

• **Cloth face coverings**: Use a standard cycle in the washing machine and regular laundry detergent. Alternatively, you can wash your cloth face covering by hand using laundry detergent or dilute bleach solution. Follow washing with a heated cycle in the dryer, or allow the face covering to air dry. Make sure your face covering is completely dry before re-using, and that is still fits you appropriately after being washed.

• **Disposable face coverings**: Cleaning or decontaminating disposable face coverings (dust masks, pleated masks) is not recommended because they don’t hold up to these treatments.

Can I re-use my disposable face covering over several days?

**When considering the re-use of a disposable face covering, always:**

• Inspect the face covering for physical damage, and for proper fit; ensure that elastic straps still provide enough tension for the face covering to fit snuggly on your face.
• Use clean or disinfected gloves when putting the face covering on and taking it off.
• Avoid touching or otherwise contaminating the interior surface of the face covering.
• Secure the face covering in a paper bag with your name on it when not the face covering is in use.
• Record time used and date on the paper bag, with each use.

What if I already wear required respiratory protection to do my work? How do face coverings fit in?

The simple answer: Wear required respiratory protection when you are working with hazards to protect yourself. When you aren't working with hazards, wear a face covering to help prevent spread of COVID-19. See the guidance table below for more details. Employees who are required to
wear respiratory protection must be medically cleared, fit-tested and trained. Please contact ehsmedserv@vt.edu or call 540-231-3998 to learn more, or to schedule services.

## Conditions for Wearing Face Coverings and for Using Respirators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If your work involves:</th>
<th>Can I safely wear my face covering?</th>
<th>Do I need to wear a respirator?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No hazardous materials, and no mechanical risks (such as mask straps getting caught in equipment).</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangerous materials which you use in chemical fume hoods, biosafety cabinets, or with other engineering controls, and you have no mechanical risks.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical risks (mask straps could get caught in equipment).</td>
<td>Wearing a typical face covering may not be safe; review with you lab manager, PI or EHS to consider alternative safety measures.</td>
<td>Do not wear a respirator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flames/heat sources, or flammable/pyrophoric chemicals.</td>
<td>To be determined by careful review of lab managers and EHS; may require a flame-resistant face covering as determined through a risk assessment with the PI. Contact EHS for assistance.</td>
<td>Do not wear a respirator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of a respirator (N95, N100, half-face or full-face elastomeric, PAPR) to prevent exposure to hazardous agents, particles, materials, fumes, and/or vapors.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes; use the respirator type that you normally wear for this work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of disposable face coverings or respirators for product protection in clean room settings, for sensitive nucleic acid procedures, etc.</td>
<td>Use the disposable face covering or respirator type that is normally required for this work for product protection.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Use of disposable medical-grade surgical masks (animal surgery, necropsy, splash protection from biological fluids).

**No; disposable medical-grade surgical masks are required here.**

| No |

**NOTE:** N-95 respirators with exhalation valves allow unfiltered, exhaled air to be released and will not protect others near you against COVID-19. Others in your lab/research space will not be at risk if they are also wearing respirators with a higher level of protection (N95, N99, N100, HEPA). However, if all others are not wearing respiratory protection, **physical distancing must be maintained.** Half-face and full-face elastomeric respirators and PAPRs also allow exhaled air to be released, unless units have stacked cartridges for HEPA filtration. If physical distances cannot be maintained in such instances, please contact EHS at 540-231-3600 for additional guidance.

**I’m not required to wear a respirator for work. What if I want to wear a respirator voluntarily?**

- Employees who are provided a filtering facepiece respirator (N-95, N-100), or who choose to wear a filtering facepiece respirator they bring from home for an additional level of comfort and protection are called voluntary users. **NOTE:** Current shortages will impact availability of these respirators for voluntary users.

- There are no medical clearance or fit testing requirements for voluntary users of **filtering facepiece** respirators.

- If you voluntarily wear **any other type** of respiratory protection, even if you bring it from home, you **must be medically cleared** by EHS Occupational Health Services (just the same as if you were required to wear a respirator for your work), but you do not need to be fit tested.

- In addition, voluntary users of respirators must read and understand the following information:

  1. Review all instructions provided by the manufacturer of your respirator regarding use, maintenance, cleaning and care, and warnings about the respirator’s limitations. If a respirator is used improperly or not kept clean, the respirator itself can become a hazard to the worker.

  2. Make sure you choose a respirator that is certified to protect against the hazard of concern. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, (NIOSH), certifies respirators. A
NIOSH label or statement of certification should appear on the respirator or respirator packaging. It will tell you what the respirator is designed for and how much it will protect you.

3. Do not wear your respirator in atmospheres containing contaminants for which your respirator is not designed to protect you. For example, a respirator designed to filter dust particles will not protect you against gases, vapors, or very small solid particles of fumes or smoke.

4. Keep track of your respirator so that you do not mistakenly use someone else's respirator.

5. If you have any questions, please contact Environmental Health and Safety at 540-231-3600.

Please contact EHS 540-231-3600 for assistance in assessing your risks and determining the safest procedure to follow in your unique situation.