

Kent County Health Department



What You Should Know about Using Facemasks and Respirators During a Flu Pandemic

This fact sheet provides information about the use of facemasks and respirators in public places during an influenza (flu) pandemic. It does not address the use of facemasks and respirators in the workplace or in healthcare settings. For the entire Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Interim Public Health Guidance for the Use of Facemasks and Respirators in Non-Occupational Community Settings During an Influenza Pandemic, visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/plan/community/maskguidancecommunity.html>.

What is a facemask?

Facemasks are loose-fitting, disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth. These include products labeled as surgical, dental, medical, procedure, isolation, and laser masks.

Facemasks help stop droplets from being spread by the person wearing them. They also keep splashes or sprays from reaching the mouth and nose of the person wearing the facemask. They are not designed to protect you against breathing in very small particles. Facemasks should be used once and then thrown away in the trash. Immediately wash your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand cleaner after removing a facemask.



What is a respirator?

A respirator (for example, an N95 or higher filtering facepiece respirator) is designed to protect you from breathing in very small particles, which might contain viruses. These types of respirators fit tightly to the face so that most air is inhaled through the filter material. To be effective, N95 respirators must be specially fitted for each person who wears one. (This process is called fit-testing and is usually conducted by an employer who requires employees to use respirators). Most of the time, N95 respirators are used in construction and other jobs that involve dust and small particles. Some healthcare workers, such as nurses and doctors, use these types of respirators when taking care of patients with diseases that can be spread through the air.

If you have a heart or lung disease or other health condition, you may have trouble breathing through respirators and you should talk with your doctor before using a respirator.

Like surgical masks, N95 respirators should only be worn once and then thrown away in the trash. Immediately wash your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand cleaner after removing a respirator.



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What is Influenza (Flu)?

The flu is a contagious **respiratory** illness caused by influenza viruses. While pandemic flu symptoms cannot be predicted before a pandemic occurs, common flu symptoms include:

- Fever (usually high)
- Headache
- Extreme Tiredness
- Dry Cough
- Sore Throat
- Runny or Stuffy Nose
- Muscle Aches
- *Stomach symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea) also can occur, but are more common in children than adults.*

Taking Protective Actions During a Flu Pandemic

A flu pandemic is an outbreak caused by a new flu virus that spreads around the world. The virus will spread easily from person to person, mostly through coughing and sneezing. Because the virus is new to people, everyone will be at risk of getting it.

During a flu pandemic, you can use simple actions to help protect yourself and others from becoming sick with the flu. No single action protects completely, but if used together, the steps below can help reduce the chances of becoming ill.

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Use an alcohol-based hand cleaner if soap and water are not available.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Stay away from other people if you are ill.
- Avoid crowded places and large gatherings as much as possible.

There may be times during a pandemic when you must be in a crowded setting or in close contact (within 6 feet) with people who might be ill. During such times, the use of a facemask or a respirator might help prevent the spread of pandemic flu.

Wearing a Facemask or a Respirator

Very little is known about the benefits of wearing facemasks and respirators to help control the spread of pandemic flu. In the absence of clear science, the steps below offer a “best estimate” to help guide decisions. They will be revised as new information becomes available.

Consider wearing a *facemask* if:

- You are sick with the flu and think you might have close contact with other people.
- You live with someone who has the flu and need to be in a crowded place.
- You are well and do not expect to be in close contact with a sick person but need to be in a crowded place.

Consider wearing a *respirator* if:

- You are well and you expect to be in close contact with people who are known or thought to be sick with pandemic flu, such as taking care of a sick person at home.

Important Information

Neither a facemask nor a respirator will give complete protection from the flu. That is why it is important to wash your hands often, cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your arm, and avoid crowds and gatherings during a pandemic. If crowded settings or contact with a sick person cannot be avoided, limit the amount of time spent in that environment, and use the guidelines above to determine if you should consider using a facemask or respirator to protect yourself and others.

To learn more about these and other issues relating to pandemic influenza, visit <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>.