

Face Masks in Schools

Frequently Asked Questions and Considerations for Use

This document provides answers to some basic questions on using and cleaning face masks and respirators. It also addresses questions that school administrators should consider when implementing COVID-19 related policies or procedures. Science shows that wearing a well-fitting mask or respirator over your nose and mouth can help prevent transmission of the respiratory droplets and aerosols that spread COVID-19.

Who should wear masks and respirators?

DHS recommends that all students and staff wear a well-fitting mask or respirator in school settings, regardless of vaccination status. Wearing a face mask or respirator is also required on all forms of public transportation, including school buses. School staff and administrators should work with their local and tribal health department to ensure that school mask policies align with any applicable state and local rules and recommendations. Face masks or respirators should NOT be placed on young children under the age of 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove them without assistance. Medical considerations, including sensory concerns and respiratory conditions, mean some individuals are not able to wear a face mask or respirator safely. Wearing a face mask or respirator may be dangerous or stressful for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

What is the rationale behind using masks and respirators?

Face masks and respirators protect both the wearer and others from illness. They reduce the wearers' exposure to infectious droplets and aerosols, and also prevent the wearer from spreading disease if they are asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic, or do not realize they are sick. Some masks and respirators may offer more protection than others but can be harder to consistently wear throughout the day. It is recommended that individuals wear the most protective mask or respirator they can that fits well and that they can wear comfortably for long periods of time, if necessary. It is important to remember that any mask is better than no mask. Mask use is particularly important when physical distancing or other prevention strategies cannot be maintained.

How do you wear a mask or respirator?

A well-fitting mask or respirator should cover the wearer's nose and mouth, fit snugly on their face, and secure in place. The wearer should avoid touching the mask or respirator, especially if hands have not been washed recently.

How many masks or respirators does one person need? And when do you need to change them?

It is recommended that individuals have access to multiple masks or respirators. The same cloth or disposable mask should not be worn for longer than a single day.

- Reusable cloth masks should be washed as soon as they become dirty, or at least once a day. If you have a disposable face mask, throw it away after wearing it once.
- Most respirators should be thrown away and replaced when the straps are stretched out and they no longer fit snugly against the face or when it becomes wet, dirty, damaged or difficult to breathe through.

School administrators should work with local partners to have an adequate supply of extra masks and respirators for students and staff to use if theirs is lost, damaged, or soiled throughout the day. Schools should also create a plan to keep masks and respirators clean and properly stored while students and staff remove them during meal times or outdoor recess.

How do you wash a cloth face mask? If you don't have regular access to a washing machine, what is the best way to wash one?

It's a good idea to wash reusable cloth masks frequently, ideally daily. Store them in a designated bag or bin until they can be laundered with detergent and hot water and dried on a hot cycle. If you are unable to machine wash/dry the cloth mask, wash it by hand with laundry detergent and hot water before air drying. Re-wearing a cloth mask without washing it is not advised, but if this is unavoidable, be sure to wash your hands immediately after putting it back on and avoid touching your face. Schools should advise families and staff on how frequently to wash cloth masks and provide support and resources for families and staff who may struggle to do so easily. For example, if a school has access to laundry services, it may consider offering a program to help families and staff wash cloth masks. A school could ask families or staff to store cloth masks in a mesh laundering bag for drop off on Fridays at a designated area. The school staff could launder the cloth masks appropriately over the weekend and return them on Monday morning. If staff will be laundering worn cloth masks, schools should provide written safety procedures and training. Disposable masks or respirators should not be washed.

How do you care for your skin when wearing a mask or respirator regularly?

Wash your face often, preferably directly before each use of the mask or respirator, and apply moisturizer to decrease friction and reduce irritation. Wear a clean mask or respirator.

When can students and staff take off their face mask or respirator during the school day?

It is recommended that students, staff, and any other individuals who are inside school buildings wear a mask or respirator. However, individuals may take them off in some situations, including:

- When eating or drinking
- While swimming
- When the individual needs to confirm his or her identity, such as when entering a secured building

Students and teachers may remove their mask or respirator when outside for physical education or recess. However, schools may develop policies that require students or staff to keep them on during these parts of the day. Schools should also provide information on how to properly remove and store masks and respirators when they are not being worn.

What should districts consider when drafting their policies regarding mask enforcement?

Districts and schools should work with staff, students, and families to establish that wearing masks and respirators in school is an important strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Schools should ensure that an appropriate supply of masks and respirators exists to support students and staff who forget theirs at home or do not have access to their own. School districts and schools should consider equity in the implementation and enforcement of any mask policies to ensure that measures are assessed to minimize potential for discriminatory implementation. Punitive measures are not recommended; rather, school administrators and staff are encouraged to work with individuals (and families) to address concerns or barriers around wearing a mask or respirator. For those students or staff who are unable to wear a mask or respirator for medical or psychological reasons, school districts are encouraged to make accommodations per requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It is important to stress with students that some reasons for not wearing a mask may not be as obvious as a visible or known medical condition (such as mental health concerns or previous traumatic experiences) and to stress the importance of privacy and the sensitivity of some of these matters. School staff may ask if someone is not wearing a mask or respirator due to disability, medical, or mental health condition. Schools may discuss alternative accommodations in the classroom and buildings for individuals who are exempt from wearing masks or respirators.

QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO CONSIDER CONCERNING MASKS AND RESPIRATORS

1. How will exceptions concerning medical concerns, including traumatic personal experiences, autism spectrum disorder, physical disability, or severe mental illness be granted? What measures will be taken to protect other students and staff who will need to interact with individuals who cannot wear a mask or respirator?
2. How will staff explain exceptions to the student body?
3. How will staff address bullying concerning masks or respirators, either due to their use, their design, or their origin (school-provided vs. purchased by families)? It is important to assess any enforcement or plans on a case-by-case basis to avoid discrimination and ensure equity.
4. How can staff prepare for potential reactions to wearing or seeing someone wear a mask or respirator due to trauma or behavioral health concerns?
5. What kind of professional development or training will be needed for staff concerning masks and respirators?
6. How can staff best teach and model best practices concerning masks and respirators?
7. How will the district address financial concerns of families if there are not enough school-issued masks or respirators?

