Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

Guidance for Cloth Face Coverings

This document provides public health information on how members of the general public can safely use cloth face coverings when they need to leave their home for a short period of time to obtain essential goods or services. Members of the general public should use a clean face covering anytime they will be in contact with other people who are not household members in public or private spaces. It is important to note that face coverings are not a substitute for always practicing physical distancing and frequent handwashing.

Our best community and individual defense against COVID-19 is to wash our hands frequently, avoid touching our eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands, avoid being around sick people and practicing physical distancing, especially by staying at home. Face coverings are not a replacement for these evidence-based strategies for slowing the spread of disease; they are just an additional tool that can protect others from possible exposure to respiratory droplets that may come from our mouth when we talk, sneeze or cough.

Cloth face coverings are not intended for use by healthcare workers, first responders, and others whose work requires close contact with people who are ill.

What is a cloth face covering?

A cloth face covering is a material that covers the nose and mouth. It can be secured to the head with ties or straps or simply wrapped around the lower face. It can be made of a variety of materials, such as cotton, silk, or linen. A cloth face covering may be factory-made or sewn by hand or can be improvised from household items such as scarfs, T-shirts, sweatshirts, or towels.

Why wear a face cover?

Recent information has indicated that covering your nose and mouth can slow the spread of COVID-19 because:

- Individuals can be contagious before the onset of symptoms. You may be contagious and do not know it. If you have covered your nose and mouth, it can limit the spread of COVID-19.
- We touch our face less when our face is covered. Touching your face after touching something contaminated with COVID-19 increases your chances of getting sick with COVID-19.

How well do cloth face coverings work to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

There is limited evidence to suggest that the use of cloth face coverings by the public during a pandemic could help reduce disease transmission. Their primary role is to reduce the release of infectious particles into the air when someone speaks, coughs, or sneezes, including someone who has COVID-19 but feels well. Cloth face coverings are not a substitute for physical distancing and washing hands and staying home when ill, but they may be helpful when combined with these primary interventions. If you plan to use a face covering it is important to keep your nose and mouth covered. Lowering the covering from your nose and mouth while talking defeats the purpose of wearing the face covering since you can spread virus while you talk.

Why might I cover my face now, when a face covering was not recommended before?

The face covering was not previously recommended for the general public for protection from getting COVID-19. We are learning that individuals may be contagious and spread COVID-19 without their knowledge, even if they do not have symptoms. This new information suggests that a face cover may protect others from infection. Wearing a face cover may help prevent the spread of droplets that might be infectious.

When should I wear a cloth face covering?

You are asked to wear a cloth face covering over your nose and mouth when you must be in public for essential activities, such as shopping at the grocery store. Wearing a cloth face covering does not eliminate the need to physically distance yourself from others and to wash your hands frequently.

What is my face covering options?

Acceptable, reusable face covering options for the general public include:

- Bandana
- Neck gaiter
- Homemade face covering
- Scarf
- Tightly woven fabric, such as cotton t-shirts and some types of towels

Do children need to use cloth face coverings as well?

Children under the age of 2 (including infants) should not wear cloth face coverings. Those between the ages of 2 and 8 should use them but under adult supervision to ensure that the child can breathe safely and avoid choking or suffocation. Children with breathing problems should not wear a face covering.

Can I use a N95 respirator or surgical mask instead?

Purchasing a respirator or surgical mask intended for the healthcare setting and health workers (including N95 respirators and surgical masks) is strongly discouraged. Medical respirators and surgical masks are worn for protection by healthcare staff and those workers who provide care to a person who might have COVID-19 or other communicable diseases.

Those who are ill with COVID-19 symptoms should not be going out of their home, but if they must leave the home for medical visits, they may also use surgical masks but can use face coverings if surgical masks are unavailable.

In contrast, the face covering recommended for the general public is intended to prevent COVID-19 transmission to others by someone who might not know they are infected. Since the intent of the face cover is to primarily protect others rather than the person wearing the cover, a surgical face mask is not necessary. Medical respirators and surgical masks are in short supply and will be increasingly needed to safely provide care for persons with COVID-19, it is critical that these medical items not be used outside of the healthcare setting.

Is a face cover required?

Everyone is asked to wear a face covering when they are interacting with others who are not members of their household in public and private spaces. Face coverings are an additional tool that individuals should use to help slow the spread of COVID-19 but does not replace other social distancing requirements. Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, or otherwise unable to remove the mask or cloth face covering without assistance should not wear one.

How should I care for a cloth face covering?

It's a good idea to wash your cloth face covering frequently, ideally after each use, or at least daily. Have a bag or bin to store cloth face coverings until they can be laundered with detergent and hot water and dried on a hot cycle. If you must re-wear your cloth face covering before washing, wash your hands immediately after putting it back on and avoid touching your face. Discard cloth face coverings that:

- No longer cover the nose and mouth
- Have stretched out or damaged ties or straps
- Cannot stay on the face
- Have holes or tears in the fabric