

Understanding the Difference


Surgical Mask

N95 Respirator

Testing and Approval	Cleared by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)	Evaluated, tested, and approved by NIOSH as per the requirements in 42 CFR Part 84
Intended Use and Purpose	Fluid resistant and provides the wearer protection against large droplets, splashes, or sprays of bodily or other hazardous fluids. Protects the patient from the wearer's respiratory emissions.	Reduces wearer's exposure to particles including small particle aerosols and large droplets (only non-oil aerosols).
Face Seal Fit	Loose-fitting	Tight-fitting
Fit Testing Requirement	No	Yes
User Seal Check Requirement	No	Yes. Required each time the respirator is donned (put on)
Filtration	Does NOT provide the wearer with a reliable level of protection from inhaling smaller airborne particles and is not considered respiratory protection	Filters out at least 95% of airborne particles including large and small particles
Leakage	Leakage occurs around the edge of the mask when user inhales	When properly fitted and donned, minimal leakage occurs around edges of the respirator when user inhales
Use Limitations	Disposable. Discard after each patient encounter.	Ideally should be discarded after each patient encounter and after aerosol-generating procedures. It should also be discarded when it becomes damaged or deformed; no longer forms an effective seal to the face; becomes wet or visibly dirty; breathing becomes difficult; or if it becomes contaminated with blood, respiratory or nasal secretions, or other bodily fluids from patients.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

Link to infographic: Click [here](#)

N95 Respirators for Healthcare Providers

N95 respirators are one type of respirator that may be used by healthcare providers to filter airborne particles to prevent the spread of COVID-19. A respirator must properly fit and seal on the individual to ensure inhaled air is pulled through the respirator's filter versus through gaps between the face and respirator. If an N95 respirator does not fit properly it is not effective. All N95 respirators should be NIOSH certified by the CDC to assure a consistent level of efficacy.

General Steps for Donning (Putting On) a N95 Respirator*

1. Using one hand place the respirator on your face with the nose piece at your fingertips. The nosepiece should span and cover the bridge of your nose and cup your chin.
2. Pull the top strap over your head resting it high on the back of your head.
3. Pull the bottom strap over your head and position it around your neck and below your ears.
4. If the respirator has a metal piece or strip use both hands to conform it to the shape of your nose.
5. Follow the manufacturer's instructions to conduct a user seal check each time a respirator is placed.

General Steps for a User Seal Check*

Perform a positive pressure seal check by covering the facepiece with your hands and exhaling gently to see if the facepiece bulges slightly.

Perform a negative pressure seal check by covering the facepiece with your hands and taking a quick, deep breath to see if the facepiece collapses slightly.

**During either test if air leaks out between your face and the faceseal, the respirator does not fit properly*

General Steps for Doffing (Taking Off) a N95 Respirator*

1. Remove the bottom strap by touching only the strap and bringing it carefully over your head.
2. Grasp the top strap and bring it over your head.
3. Pull the respirator away from the face without touching the front of the respirator. Do not touch the front of the respirator as this is likely contaminated.
4. Dispose of the respirator in the trash and immediately wash hands with warm water and soap.

**Refer to the specific manufacturer's instructions for respirator-specific instructions for donning, doffing, and user seal checks.*

Surgical Masks for Healthcare Providers

Surgical masks are one type of face mask meant to help block large-particle droplets, splashes, sprays or splatters that may contain viruses and bacteria from reaching the wearer's mouth and nose. If respirators are unavailable, use of a facemask is recommended. Surgical masks also reduce other individuals exposure to the wearer's saliva and respiratory secretions. Due to the loose fit between the surface of the face mask and the wearer's face, they do not provide complete protection.

General Steps for Donning (Putting On) and Doffing (Taking Off) a Surgical Mask

Resource: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/using-ppe.html>

Homemade Cloth Masks

The CDC recommends that members of the public use simple cloth face coverings when in public in places where social distancing is difficult to maintain (e.g. grocery stores, pharmacies). This will slow the spread of COVID-19 by individuals who are currently asymptomatic and may be transmitting the virus before symptoms appear.

Resource: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html>

Tutorial on homemade masks by the U.S. Surgeon General:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPx1yqvJgf4&feature=youtu.be>

Additional Resources

Differences between surgical masks and respirators:

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/pdfs/UnderstandDifferenceInfographic-508.pdf>

FDA Materials on N95 Respirators and Surgical Masks: <https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/personal-protective-equipment-infection-control/n95-respirators-and-surgical-masks-face-masks>

Demonstrative video by OSHA on the difference between respirators and surgical masks:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovSLAuY8ib8>

Demonstrative video by OSHA on performing a seal check: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGXiUyAoEd8>