



Masks 101: What You Need to Know

After nearly 24 months of living with COVID-19 and almost as long wearing masks to protect ourselves against the virus, more information is being released about the types of masks that are most effective at reducing the spread of COVID, in particular more contagious strains like the Delta variant and Omicron.

And remember, regardless of what type of mask you use, knowing how to properly put it on and remove it is key to ensuring it works properly and provides you protection. [Here are some helpful tips](#) on how to put on and remove personal protective equipment (PPE) and more advice [specific to non-medical masks](#).

N95s



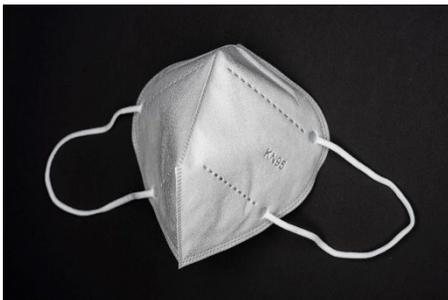
The "95" refers to the mask's 95% efficiency rate at filtering out tiny airborne particles like viruses and bacteria. An N95 is recommended when aerosol generating procedures are being performed (e.g., healthcare settings).

N95s are made of non-woven polypropylene fibre and may or may not have an exhalation valve. In North America, the convention is for N95s to be fit tested to ensure the correct size is used. This requires someone trained in fit testing to determine the right mask size for you.

Using unfitted N95s is *not* recommended.

There is some literature that suggests that wearing an N95 that has not been fit tested provides a false sense of security which can lead to unsafe utilization.

KN95s



KN95s are very comparable to N95s.

Both are rated to filter out 95% of very small particles. KN95s have a seam down the centre so they can be folded in half and are secured with ear loops. They are usually available in different sizes. KN95s do not require fit testing and so, for this reason, are the recommended mask type for those in non-medical settings. N95s are the U.S. standard, while KN95s are the Chinese standard for close-fitting filtration devices. The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) has authorized the use of KN95 masks as a suitable alternative for N95 masks.

Surgical Masks



Surgical masks have long been utilized by medical professionals for their reliability at filtering out unwanted contaminants. And though their often-looser fit means they are not as effective as N95 and KN95 masks, they continue to be a reliable option for protecting against COVID-19. The key to making the most of a surgical mask is the fit—the tighter and snugger you can get it,

the better it will protect you.

Cloth Masks



The prevalence of cloth masks in stores and the streets has increased dramatically since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. And though they were once deemed sufficient for protection against the virus, the science now indicates that non-medical masks are not the preferred mask type. But if they are all you have available, a few things can make them more effective.

First, try to find ones that are made of tightly woven material and are three layers thick (including a filtering material). Second, opt for those that include a wire across the bridge of the nose and tie at the back of your head, all to ensure a closer fit. Third, make sure you wash and care for them properly and when in doubt, double up.

Resources

"Safely putting on and taking off a non-medical mask (i.e. a cloth mask)," Ottawa Public Health https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/resources/Documents/COVID-19_Safely_Putting_on_Taking_off_Nonmedical_Mask_OPH_EN.pdf

"Recommended Steps: Putting on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)," Public Health Ontario <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/ipac/ppe-recommended-steps>

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/pdfs/facialhairwmask11282017-508.pdf>

"N95 Masks Explained," Honeywell <https://www.honeywell.com/us/en/news/2020/03/n95-masks-explained>

"Facial Hairstyles and Filtering Facepiece Respirators," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/respsource3surgicaln95.html

"N95 Vs. KN95 Masks: What's the Difference?" Popular Mechanics

<https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a35383193/n95-vs-kn95-mask-differences/>

"What's the difference between N95 and KN95 masks?" Smart Air Filters

<https://smartairfilters.com/en/blog/whats-difference-between-n95-kn95-masks/>