

## Risktopic

# Face Coverings, Face Masks, and Respiratory Protection for COVID-19

Establishing appropriate workplace controls to minimise the spread of COVID-19 is critical as employees return to the workplace. While engineering controls and administrative controls should be the first consideration, PPE may be necessary.

## Introduction

Preventing and/or mitigating the spread of COVID-19 amongst the workforce will rely on employer plans for intervention. Whilst engineering and administrative controls are considered effective for minimizing the exposure to COVID-19, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) may also be necessary when those controls are not viable. Although correctly used and proper fitting PPE can help prevent certain exposures, it should not supersede other prevention strategies.

## Discussion

When deciding if employees will be required to wear face coverings, face masks, or respiratory protection, it is important to ensure engineering and administrative controls have been considered. Recommendations for PPE and other protective measures specific to job tasks may change depending on factors including, the impact of COVID-19 in your geographical area, updates to risk assessments, and information on PPE effectiveness. Community-based factors will influence strategies that may change as things evolve. When determining PPE requirements, it is important employees are trained on how to correctly use the necessary protection, and the PPE meets the following factors:

- Selected based upon exposures to the worker
- Properly fitted, and refitted as applicable (i.e. Respirators)
- Consistently and correctly worn when required
- Properly maintained, replaced, disposed of

## Guidance

Guidance may vary based on the level of exposure of each workplace via community spread, the number of COVID-19 cases in the workplace, and/or the exposure level employees face regarding COVID-19.

To properly understand if face coverings, face masks, or respiratory protection are necessary in your workplace it is important to understand the exposure risk level for employees. Most non-healthcare environments will fall under the medium or low exposure risk level.

Classifying Worker Exposure to COVID-19			
Exposure Risk	Conditions	Workplaces in this category	PPE Guidance
<b>VERY HIGH</b>	Jobs with high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of COVID-19 during specific medical postmortem, or lab procedures	Healthcare personnel, emergency responders, laboratory personnel, morgue workers (collecting or handling specimens of known COVID-19 patients, performing aerosol generating procedures)	Will likely need additional PPE, including either a face mask or respirator, depending on job tasks and exposure risks
<b>HIGH</b>	Jobs with high potential for exposure to COVID-19	Healthcare delivery and transport staff, medical transport workers, mortuary workers involved in preparing bodies	
<b>MEDIUM</b>	Jobs which require frequent and/or close contact (within 6ft) with people who may be infected with COVID-19, but who are not known or suspected COVID-19 patients and are in areas with ongoing community transmission.	Includes workers who may come into contact with general public (schools, high volume retail settings) and workers in high population density work environments	Depending on other controls in place, added PPE may be needed. PPE ensembles will vary by work task
<b>LOW (Caution)</b>	Jobs which do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being infected with COVID-19 nor frequent contact (within 6ft) of the general public	Workers who have minimal occupational contact with public and other coworkers	Additional PPE is not recommended. Should continue using what they would ordinarily use

After engineering and administrative controls have been implemented and/or considered, there still may be a need for PPE. When considering the use of face coverings, face masks, or respirators it is important to understand the differences, as well as requirements related to their use.

Type	What it is	What it is NOT
<b>Cloth Face Covering</b>	Intended to protect others from the wearer. Helps people who may have the virus and do not know it from spreading it to others	Not proven to protect the wearer Not considered respiratory protection
<b>Surgical Mask (Face Mask)</b>	Protects wearer against large droplets, splashes or sprays of bodily or other hazardous fluids  Loose fitting  Protects others from the wearer's respiratory emissions	Does NOT provide the wearer with a reliable level of protection from inhaling smaller airborne particles  Not tight fitting  Not considered respiratory protection
<b>N95 Respirator (filtering face piece)</b>	Protects wearer by reducing exposure to particles, small particle aerosols and large droplets. Filters out 95% of airborne particles  Tight fitting when worn correctly	Not intended for use by general public
<b>Half Mask Respirator</b>	More protective than a filtering face piece respirator when worn correctly, for procedures likely to generate aerosols	Not intended for use by general public

## Conclusion

PPE is just one element of effectively protecting workers from an exposure. When making decisions about if this protection is necessary in the workplace, many factors must be considered. Engineering and administrative controls should always be considered as a first option, with PPE as the last line of defense. All decisions should be based on facts appropriate to your work environment and situation

## References

Safe Work Australia – Types and uses of face masks (infographic)

Australian Government Department of Health - Coronavirus (COVID-19) information on the use of surgical masks

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