



June 24 Use of Masks to Prevent COVID-19 in Health Care and Community Settings

COVID-19 (novel coronavirus official name), data, reports, and guidance via CDC and WHO

Threat Assessment

The American College of Physicians recently released guidance and information in a journal for healthcare facilities and public use in regards to the use of N95, surgical, and cloth masks to prevent COVID-19. Several questions were asked throughout the journal to help address importantly debated topics in the use of various masks. The following question is from the journal and more can be found by visiting the webpage.

"What is the effectiveness of N95 respirators, surgical masks, and cloth masks for the prevention of COVID-19 in addition to standard precautions (gloves + handwashing) in community settings?"

The goal of using N95 respirators, surgical masks, or cloth masks is to prevent transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infection from asymptomatic or symptomatic infected persons to uninfected persons (source control). Currently, no direct evidence exists for the effectiveness or comparative effectiveness of various types of respirators or masks for preventing SARS-CoV-2 infection in community settings. Low-certainty evidence showed that mask use may reduce the risk for SARS-CoV-1 infection compared with no mask use in the community, but a major limitation of the studies is that they did not specify mask type. Low-certainty indirect evidence also found that N95 respirators may not reduce the risk for noncoronavirus respiratory infections compared with surgical masks or no masks, and moderate-certainty indirect evidence showed that surgical masks probably do not reduce the risk compared with no masks. For surgical masks, there was moderate-certainty evidence of nonserious harms, such as discomfort and difficulty in breathing, compared with no mask use, and low-certainty evidence showed that N95 respirators may not increase discomfort compared with surgical masks. The review identified no eligible studies on the use of cloth masks in community settings.

N95 respirators should not be used in a community setting, given the absence of demonstrated benefit, the possible harm with improper use (that is, the requirement for fit testing), and the global shortage of N95 respirators. Unlike N95 respirators, surgical masks and cloth masks do not require special fitting,

making their use more practical if individual fitting is infeasible. Persons should seek guidance from the local community and statewide public health guidelines for mask use in light of the absence of evidence in the community setting to reduce the risk for transmission of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Factors to consider include exposure context (number of people, whether indoors or outdoors, ventilation), epidemiologic data (such as reproduction rate, daily case counts, hospitalizations, and deaths), and local demographics (such as high-risk populations). Individual values and preferences should be taken into account when deciding on the type of mask to use (surgical or cloth mask), because the benefits and harms for surgical versus cloth masks are finely balanced. The use of cloth masks in community settings has been encouraged by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (4). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a risk-based approach for decision makers when recommending use of nonmedical masks, such as cloth masks, in the community setting (6). The WHO notes potential risks associated with mask use, including self-contamination (via improper handling of masks), breathing difficulties, and a false sense of security that could potentially detract from taking other precautions, such as physical distancing (6). Regardless of mask type, clinicians and public health officials should educate the general public about appropriate mask use (Table 3).

[\(ACP\)](#)

Action Steps:

1. When in close contact with others, persons experiencing symptoms and those in contact with them should wear a surgical mask or cloth mask.
2. A person who interacts with many people (such as flight attendants, restaurant servers, grocery store workers, cab drivers, and others) may benefit from wearing a surgical or cloth mask.
3. Access the full report with further information, guidance, and graphics, [here](#).

[\(ACP\)](#)

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