

## Coronavirus Primer: Face Covering versus Mask

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On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic. The purpose of this brief commentary is to provide fact-based information that can be utilized as we support and educate our communities about Coronavirus prevention across the nation.

### WHAT IS A MASK?

According to the Food and Drug Administration N95 respirators and surgical masks (i.e., medical grade face masks) are examples of particulate filtering personal protective equipment (i.e., PPE). The N95 respirator and medical grade surgical masks are used to protect the wearer from airborne particles and from liquid contaminating the face (FDA, 2020).

### WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A N95 RESPIRATOR AND SURGICAL MASKS?

The major difference is the size of potentially infectious particles filtered. When fitted properly an N95 respiratory blocks at least 95% of very small (0.3 micron) airborne particles. A surgical mask is meant to help block large-particle droplets (> 5 microns), splashes, sprays, or splatter that may contain germs (WHO, 2020)

### WHO SHOULD WEAR A MASK?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) does not recommend that the general public wear N95 respirators or surgical masks to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including coronavirus (COVID-19). These are critical supplies that must continue to be reserved for health care workers and other medical first responders, as recommended by current CDC guidance.

### WHAT IS A FACE COVERING?

A cloth face covering is a non-medical grade material (i.e., fabric) that covers the nose and mouth. Face coverings are used to protect others from potentially infectious particles released into the air when the person wearing the mask speaks, coughs, or sneezes (CDC, 2020). The purpose of face coverings is to slow the spread of COVID-19.

### WHEN SHOULD A FACE COVERING BE WORN?

Face covering should be worn in public for essential activities, where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies). **ESPECIALLY**, in cities and states identified as “hot spots” or “epicenters” of significant community-based transmission.

### WHO SHOULD NOT WEAR A FACE COVERING?

Children less than 2 years of age, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

### ARE FACE MASKS USED IN PLACE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING?

**No.** Face masks should be used **in addition to** social distancing and diligent handwashing and hand hygiene to prevent and reduce the spread of Coronavirus.

### WHAT TO DO SHOULD YOU GET SICK?

If you get sick with flu-like symptoms, and are not in a high-risk group, in most cases, you should self-isolate except to seek medical care, treat symptoms and stay hydrated. If, however, you are in a high-risk group (including young children, people 65 and older, pregnant women and people with certain medical conditions), or are very sick or worried about your illness, contact your health care provider.<sup>2</sup>

## REFERENCES

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