

Regulatory Compliance

The CDC Recommends You Use Face Masks That Meet These New Standards

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This new face mask guidance is crucial to know as cases of the Omicron variant increase.

Masks have—understandably—been incredibly popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, though when officials from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said that people who are fully vaccinated against the virus no longer needed to mask up, there was certainly a temporary drop in use.

Those recommendations have now changed and, with the **rapid spread** of the **Omicron variant** across the country along with a recent **sharp uptick in COVID-19 cases**, people are suddenly paying more attention to their masks once more. This being said, new **CDC guidelines for masks are now in place**.

If you've been using the same type of face mask since the pandemic started, it's important to know that the CDC now has very specific recommendations on what, exactly, to look for in a face mask. That includes newer designations issued by the ASTM International and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) that help specify exactly which masks in the U.S. are considered high quality.

Not familiar with the new standards? Here's what you need to know.

What are the new CDC mask guidelines?

Overall, the CDC **recommends** wearing a mask made of at least two layers or more of washable, breathable fabric that completely covers your nose and mouth. The mask should also fit snugly against the sides of your face and not have gaps. The CDC also suggests having a mask with a nose wire to help you get a secure fit and prevent air from leaking out of the top of the mask.

But the CDC also suggests looking for masks that meet new standards from the ASTM and NIOSH. These masks "are designed and tested to ensure they perform at a consistent level." Masks that meet one of these designations should also have a label that explicitly states that they've met one of these designations.

New mask standards include:

- **Meets ASTM F3502.** This **designation** means that the masks are able to be used as "a means of source control for individual wearers by reducing the number of expelled droplets and aerosols from the wearer's nose and mouth into the air," per the ASTM. It also means that they "potentially offer a degree of particulate filtration to reduce the amount of inhaled particulate matter by the wearer," ASTM says. Among other things, **these masks must**:
 - Cover the wearer's nose and mouth and fit snugly against the sides of the face and nose without gaps in a design analysis.
 - Have a way to keep the mask over the nose and mouth for the expected period of use and

- range of activities.
 - Have non-irritating and nontoxic materials where the mask contacts the skin.
 - Be either **disposable masks** or reusable masks.
 - Be able to be worn by people with a range of fit characteristics (excluding children under age 2), or designed with multiple sizes to allow fit for a wide variety of people.
- **Meets Workplace Performance.** This **NIOSH designation** means that a mask must meet the ASTM standards, along with providing at least 50% filtration. They also must be breathable and have a leakage ratio of greater than or equal to five. (A higher leakage ratio number means that fewer particles escape around the edges, indicating products provide better source control across users with a variety of facial sizes, NIOSH says.)
 - **Meets Workplace Performance Plus.** This is the best designation a face mask can have. It **indicates** that a mask meets ASTM standards and provides at least 80% filtration. These masks also must be breathable and have a leakage ratio of 10 or greater.

Why is new CDC mask guidance needed?

"It's important to have rating systems for masks to make it clear what level of protection the mask offers to the consumer, and that the performance of the mask has been reviewed by an independent third party," says Aaron Collins, a mechanical engineer in Minnesota and self-described "citizen engineer" who has been studying mask efficiency.

Infectious disease expert Amesh A. Adalja, M.D., a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, agrees. "It's important to have criteria for the performance of masks so that customers can understand that not all masks are equal and some have been tested to document their performance," he says. "Standards were important to develop so that manufacturers had a goal to aim for."

But, Collins says, the F3502 standard alone is not overly helpful. "Since the standard only covers 30% to 50% protection (Level 1) and greater than 50% (Level 2), it can be confusing to the customer," he says. "If you buy a F3502 mask, currently the range of filtration is 22% to 99% from various manufacturers. How does that help the consumer?"

Collins points out, though, that all masks that have received one of these designations are listed on the **CDC's website**, along with data about the level of protection they provide. So, you're able to look into specifics before you buy a new mask.

When does the CDC recommend that you wear a face mask?

This has changed a bit over time, and it's understandable to be a little unsure about what the latest recommendations are. Currently, the CDC **recommends** that everyone who is two years or older and unvaccinated against COVID-19 wear a face mask in indoor public places. However, the agency also recommends wearing a face mask in crowded indoor settings and when you're in close contact with other people when COVID-19 cases in your area are substantial or high (which is most areas of the country right now).

People who have underlying health conditions that put them at increased risk for severe COVID-19 should also continue to wear masks in public, the CDC says.

What happens if your mask doesn't meet new CDC mask standards?

This is slightly tricky, according to Thomas Russo, M.D., professor and chief of infectious disease at the University at Buffalo in New York. "This is imperfect because the ASTM and NIOSH hasn't been able to review and inspect all masks that are widely available," he says. "But, if your mask does have the standard of approval, at least you know what you're getting."

Still, Dr. Russo stresses, "it doesn't mean that all masks out there have been submitted to these organizations and haven't met performance characteristics" if they don't have one of the designations.

If your favorite mask isn't on the list, it's a good idea to make sure that it "has sufficient layers to make sure it's effective," says William Schaffner, M.D., an infectious disease specialist and professor at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. If you're using a cloth mask, he suggests adding a filter (if there is a filter pocket available). If given the option, he suggests using a surgical mask, provided you can get a good fit around your nose, mouth, and the sides of your face. (Dr. Russo is also partial to KF94 masks, the Korean version of N95 masks.)

Dr. Russo stresses the importance of having a well-performing mask that's also comfortable to wear. "At the end of the day, it doesn't matter about the performance characteristics of the mask if it's not comfortable and you're not going to wear it," he says.

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