



Face Coverings: General Use

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Introduction

General use face coverings are still required on Harvard University premises. Limited exceptions apply.

“General use” applies to faculty, staff, students, or visitors who must wear a face covering in accordance with current Harvard University policy for source control on Harvard University’s premises.

Face coverings provide source control and protect others from potentially infectious droplets that might be generated by the wearer. This is particularly important because people can spread the SARS-COV-2 virus without showing symptoms.

Anyone on campus not following Harvard University’s policy for face coverings may be asked to leave campus or be subject to administrative action.

Those who wish to be medically exempt from wearing a face covering must:

- Have documentation from their primary care physician and a Harvard University occupational medicine physician.
- Work with Harvard University Disability Resources, a local disability coordinator, or their manager and Human Resources to identify and implement alternative means of reducing the potential for transmitting the SARS-COV-2 virus such as an alternative mask, enforced physical distancing, or other safety measures.

Note that face coverings are not considered to be personal protective equipment (PPE) (with the exception of those certified by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) or foreign agencies as allowed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)¹ during the COVID-19 pandemic).

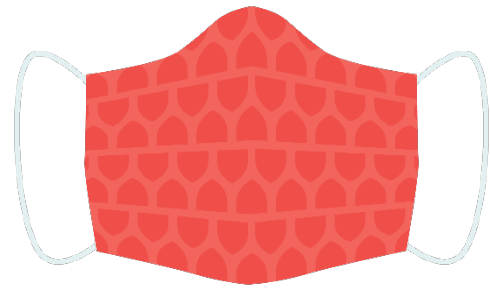
¹ [OSHA: Enforcement Guidance for Use of Respiratory Protection Equipment Certified under Standards of Other Countries or Jurisdictions During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Pandemic](#), Retrieved February 12, 2021



General Use Face Coverings



Disposable Face Covering



Cloth Face Covering

Use Guidelines

General use face coverings should:

- Be multi-layered and comprised of a minimum of two layers.

Cloth masks should block light when held up to a bright light source.

- Contain ear loops, ties, or otherwise fit snugly under the chin, on the sides of the face, and over the wearer's nose and mouth.

Look for masks that contain a nose wire to achieve a better fit.

- Allow for breathing without restriction.
- Be free of valves and similar openings.

A valve defeats the purpose of a face covering as it potentially allows virus particles to escape.

- Be changed or replaced when they become wet or soiled.
- Be laundered regularly and when soiled.

Please ensure that you wash your hands properly for 20 seconds with soap and water or use an approved, alcohol-based hand sanitizer before putting on or taking off your face covering.



PPE requirements sometimes supersede the need for general face coverings.

Those who are issued PPE will receive the necessary training and equipment. For questions, see your manager/supervisor.

Unacceptable Face Coverings

Some face coverings have been shown to be less effective at containing droplets.

The following face coverings are **not acceptable**:

- Single layer cloth face coverings.
- Bandanas hanging loosely and not secured under the chin.
- Face coverings with highly elastic fabric that when stretched enlarges the spaces between the threads and does not adequately capture droplets.
- Face shields **without** the use of an approved face covering.

Requirement to Wear Face Coverings

Face coverings continue to be required indoors at Harvard University in all spaces, with limited exceptions.

Even when not wearing a mask outdoors, all Harvard University community members should have an [acceptable face covering](#) on their persons at all times when on campus.

Unvaccinated Individuals

Unvaccinated individuals may remove their face coverings when they are outdoors and are able to consistently maintain at least six feet from others. This is for any purpose, including eating, drinking, and physical fitness.

Mask usage is required for unvaccinated persons when outdoors and six feet of distancing cannot be consistently maintained.

Unvaccinated persons should ensure they take steps to plan and protect themselves while eating and drinking by remaining physically distanced from others.



Fully Vaccinated Individuals

Fully vaccinated persons are no longer required to wear a face covering when outdoors. Fully vaccinated persons should consider wearing a mask in crowded outdoor settings and for outdoor activities with [close contact](#) with others who may not be fully vaccinated.

All Individuals

Face coverings are **still required** for all individuals:

- Prior to entering and while exiting all Harvard University buildings and other indoor spaces.
- At bus stops and when boarding Harvard University shuttles and other shared transportation.
- In public transit vehicles.
- In shared Harvard University and private vehicles used on campus.

Occupants of ride-shares and taxis must also continue to wear face coverings.

- In Harvard University Health Services (HUHS) and other healthcare facilities and other settings hosting vulnerable populations.

Indoor Settings

Face coverings are **no longer required in the following indoor settings**:

- When actively eating or drinking in approved or predetermined areas.

Face coverings must be worn until seated. A face covering may only be removed when actively eating and drinking and be replaced as soon as finished eating and before leaving the chair.

- In your personal residence.
- In performing and instructional arts (i.e., music, dance, singing, and theatre settings) when the performer is vaccinated and at least 14 feet of distance can be maintained between unmasked performers and all other persons.



See [Harvard University On Campus Activity Guidance: Activity-Specific - Performances and Rehearsals](#) for additional details.

- In academic, instructional settings professors and lecturers may optionally remove their face coverings for the purpose of instruction **if the additional Harvard University protocols described in the [Harvard University On Campus Activity Guidance](#) are followed.**
- In common areas of a shared residence if all are vaccinated.
- If visiting another residence if all are vaccinated.
- When accessing a shared bathroom when no one else is in the room for the purpose of toothbrushing, other grooming, and while taking a shower.
- When accessing a shared bathroom and physical distancing is maintained for the purpose of toothbrushing, other grooming, and while taking a shower.
- When alone in a private space that is dedicated to one individual (i.e., a private office) if the door is closed.
- When a shared room (such as a shared office or conference room) is used by a single individual when the door is closed.

Please note that school or department policies, including food service operations and research or healthcare environments, may be more restrictive or have specific requirements.

In certain settings, such as medical clinics and laboratories, additional PPE (e.g., N95 respirators) may be needed instead of general use face coverings.

Additional Face Covering Types

FDA regulated medical-grade face masks are necessary only in certain situations, such as in medical and dental healthcare settings.

These masks may also be used by those that find them more comfortable or need additional protection.



N95 and Similar Filtering Facepiece Respirators

An N95 is a type of filtering facepiece respirator (FFR) that relies on a tight fit to filter particles in the air.

An N95 may be appropriate when someone is working in close contact to aerosol-generating procedures and exposure cannot be controlled through other engineering controls such as by ventilation or administrative controls.

Examples of activity types that **may require a respirator** at Harvard University include:

- Dentistry/dental hygiene
- Certain medical procedures with unmasked patients generating aerosols
- Medical students in clinical rotations
- Emergency medical technicians (EMT) and laboratory work with live SARS virus

A user seal check is required each time a respirator is donned and necessitates a clean-shaven face to enable a tight seal. It can be difficult to tolerate wearing a respirator for an extended time.

Respirators with exhalation valves may not be used to ease breathing resistance because they are not protective of others in the environment. Not everyone is able to wear a respirator because of medical conditions that may be made worse when breathing through a respirator.

Every person required to wear a respirator of any type must follow Harvard University's Respiratory Protection Program. In this case, you must take the respiratory protection training, obtain a medical evaluation, and be fit-tested.

Note that if you are required to wear a respirator as a medical, dental, or other frontline worker you may only use surgical N95s approved by NIOSH.



Frequently Asked Questions

Are clear masks permitted for use on campus?

Clear masks and cloth masks with a clear, plastic panel are designed so that the wearer's mouth can be viewed by others.

Clear masks may be an option to accommodate class lecturers, instructors, students, staff, faculty, and others interested in their use for improving communication. In addition, some individuals with hearing loss may rely on lip-reading to communicate, and a clear mask may be an option for effective communication (the best practice is to consult with the individual with hearing loss on their preferred method of communication).

To conform with Harvard University general face covering guidelines, clear masks should:

- Ensure that the clear portion of the mask must be made of impermeable material(s). Other materials must be comprised of multiple layers.
- Contain ear loops, ties, or otherwise fit snugly under the chin, on the sides of the face, and over the wearer's nose and mouth.
- Allow for breathing without restriction.
- Be free of valves and similar openings.
- Prevent excessive moisture from collecting on the inside of the clear mask.

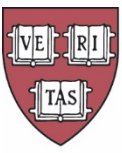
Face shields do not qualify as clear face coverings and cannot be substituted for a general use face covering.

Schools and units may have additional requirements and restrictions concerning the use of face coverings.

The following clear masks serve as examples of general use, clear face coverings:

- [Safe'N'Clear mask](#)
- [BendShape mask](#)

Before bulk purchasing any clear masks, consider testing a small number of masks to ensure proper fit and function. Contact EH&S with any additional questions.



If considering the use of clear masks due to a hearing impairment, please consult with the [Harvard University Disability Office](#).

Can neck gaiters be worn on campus?

Neck gaiters, also referred to as buffs or neck warmers, consist of a tube of fabric that may be single or multi-layered and that covers the wearer's neck and face. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, neck gaiters were largely worn to protect wearers against the sun and cold weather.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises those choosing neck gaiters to wear a gaiter with **two layers, or to fold the gaiter to make two or more layers**.

The CDC advises that face coverings worn in public spaces be multi-layered and cover the user's nose and mouth.

Face coverings with loosely woven material, and those with highly elastic fabric that enlarge the spaces between threads when stretched and cannot adequately capture droplets, are deemed unacceptable for use while on campus.

All face coverings must adhere to the requirements set forth by both the CDC and this guidance.

Please note that school or department policies, including food service operations and research environments, may be more restrictive or have specific requirements. Work tasks requiring additional protective measures supersede this guidance.

Can I wear my own N95 or similar filtering facepiece respirator to work on campus?

Universal masking, vaccination, high cadence testing, rigorous contact tracing, symptom awareness, and aggressive case management are components of a multi-layered strategy that has been very effective in preventing transmission at Harvard University.

Properly fitting, multi-layered face coverings of many types are effective for general use, and respirators such as N95s (or KN95s (Chinese standard) and KF94s (Korean standard)) are only needed in certain circumstances when close contact with high-risk, aerosol generating procedures cannot be eliminated.



Disposable, three-layer “procedure masks” have been provided in many research buildings and to undergraduates and are available in several locations around Harvard University.

Individuals who wish to use a respirator, rather than the disposable procedure mask provided, are welcome to supply their own as long as the respirator does not have an exhalation valve.

OSHA’s respiratory protection standard allows for the voluntary use of Filtering Facepiece Respirators (FFRs) like N95s or KN95s without medical clearance or fit testing. To voluntarily wear a respirator you are required to complete the [Harvard University Respiratory Protection for Voluntary Users training](#).

In addition, it is important that you:

- Read and heed all instructions provided by the manufacturer on use, maintenance, cleaning and care, and warnings regarding the respirator's limitations.

Keep track of your respirator so that you do not mistakenly use someone else's respirator.

- Choose respirators certified for use to protect against the contaminant of concern.

NIOSH of the United States Department of Health and Human Services is the agency that certifies respirators. A label or statement of certification should appear on the respirator or respirator packaging. It will tell you what the respirator is designed for and how much it will protect you.

- Do not wear your respirator into atmospheres containing contaminants for which your respirator is not designed to protect against.

For example, a respirator designed to filter dust particles will not protect you against gases, vapors, or very small solid particles of fumes or smoke.

While members of the community may prefer to wear respirators, rather than procedure masks, contact tracing has revealed that social activities and parties (i.e., eating and drinking, removing masks, moving around a room, and talking with multiple people) are key factors in infection. These risky behaviors occur at both small gatherings and large ones, however classroom and other masked activities have not been identified as a source of transmission on campus.



I have heard some news reports say that it is better to wear two masks simultaneously. Does Harvard University recommend this too, and may I wear two masks simultaneously while on campus?

An appropriate, tight-fitting, and multi-layered face covering provides source control that protects people around you and has been very effective in preventing transmission in combination with other control measures at Harvard University (see [Use Guidelines](#) for more information).

If an individual chooses to wear multiple face coverings, it is important that at least one of their face coverings complies with [use guidelines](#).

For more detailed information on safely improving the fit and filtration, please see CDC's latest guidance on ways to increase your mask protection while not impeding respiration.²

Please note that school or department policies, including research environments, may be more restrictive or have specific requirements.

Work tasks requiring additional protective measures will supersede this guidance.

Why are N95s and KN95s not being required for more activities at Harvard University?

An appropriate, tight-fitting, and multi-layered face covering provides source control that protects people around you and has been very effective in preventing transmission in combination with other control measures at Harvard University (see [Use Guidelines](#) for more information).

At Harvard University, FFRs such as N95s are only needed in certain circumstances when close contact with high-risk, aerosol generating procedures cannot be eliminated.

² [CDC: Improve the Fit and Filtration of Your Mask to Reduce the Spread of COVID-19](#), Retrieved February 12, 2021



Off-campus communities and establishments and places of work may have differing policies.

References

- [ASTM: Standards for Medical Face Masks and Protective Clothing](#), Retrieved May 26, 2020
- [CDC: Your Guide to Masks](#), Retrieved June 29, 2021
- [Massachusetts: COVID-19 Mask Requirements](#), Retrieved July 30, 2021