OVERVIEW: This document provides general guidance on the use and care of cloth masks. In accordance with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and public health guidelines, wearing face masks and adhering to physical distancing practices are critical components in helping to maintain the health and safety of the entire campus community. Homemade masks made of fabric and cloth are not considered Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). However, these masks can be an effective complement to physical distancing, handwashing, and other mitigation measures.

WHY UNIVERSAL MASKING? COVID-19 spreads mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice (e.g., while shouting, chanting, or singing). These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. Cloth masks limit the wearer from spreading infectious droplets in the air. Using homemade or cloth masks will prevent those who may be infectious but only mildly symptomatic or non-symptomatic from spreading the virus to others.

UNIVERSAL MASKING REQUIREMENTS AND SOURCING: Employees, students, and visitors are required to practice physical distancing and wear face masks/coverings at all times in campus buildings (e.g., must be worn in offices, classrooms, labs, hallways, stairways, etc.). The following updated Penn State masking requirements are provided in response to recent CDC and corresponding PA DOH updates to masking orders (May 13, 2021):

Masking is expected by all individuals, regardless of vaccination status, when inside Penn State campus buildings and on public transportation across all campuses. Vaccinated individuals are not required to wear a mask when outdoors. Those who are not vaccinated must wear a mask outdoors on campus when they cannot be physically distant from individuals outside of their household or “pod.”

These information supersedes previous requirements, and will continue to be updated as necessary to comply with CDC, PADOH and local laws and requirements. Please also refer to the Penn State Virus Info Health Guidelines webpages for additional information.

Masks do not need to be worn when eating or drinking, when isolated in a private office or vehicle, or when use adversely affects an employee’s safety or health. Refer to the PADOH Updated Order Regarding Universal Mask Coverings for additional clarifications. The University will make cloth masks available through Penn State General Stores (Item # Z11683000) as available in the eBuy catalog. As additional supplies are being obtained, limited amounts of surgical masks (Item # Z11682008) can be used on an interim basis until cloth masks are available. Employees may use homemade cloth masks if they meet the guidance outlined by the CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health.

RESERVE RESPIRATORS FOR HEALTHCARE AND REQUIRED OPERATIONS: N95 respirators and surgical masks are designed to protect those working in high risk situations with a likelihood of exposure. Medical-grade masks should not be used for “universal masking” if cloth masks are available.

GENERAL NOTES ABOUT UNIVERSAL MASKING:

- Remember this saying: "My mask protects you, your mask protects me." If you start to become ill, the purpose of the mask is to minimize the spread of germs.
- Masks are to meet the following guidelines:
• Fit snugly around the mouth/nose and comfortably against the side of the face.
• Be secured with ties or ear loops.
• Include multiple layers of fabric.
• Allow for breathing without restriction.
• Capable of being laundered and machine dried without damage or change to shape.
• Masks with exhaust valves are not acceptable (the valves allow air and respiratory droplets to escape the mask, which results in less protection for others).
• Evidence shows that single-layer face coverings, including many neck gaiters, are not as effective in stopping respiratory droplets as multi-layer face coverings. At this time, it is recommended that all faculty, staff, and students wear a multi-layer mask or a procedure mask.
• Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.
• Maintain physical distancing by keeping six feet of separation when possible. Continue to wash your hands often throughout the day for at least 20 seconds.

USE AND CARE OF CLOTH MASKS: Best practices for fabric and cloth masks are as follows:
• Wash all masks upon receiving as they are not sterilized.
• Wash the mask after every use.
• Wash in hot water with regular detergent. Dry completely on a hot setting.
• Before putting on a mask and immediately after removing, wash hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
• Ensure the mask fits snugly around the mouth and nose.
• Do not wear the mask if it is damp or wet from spit or mucus.
• Remove the mask from behind without touching the front side.

DOUBLE MASKING: Recent CDC guidance suggests that double masking may improve facial coverage and wear for the user. However, double masking is not mandatory and should not be done if it creates breathing difficulty.

EXCEPTIONS FOR WEARING CLOTH MASKS: The use of cloth masks should not create an unsafe condition for employees when operating equipment or executing a task. Masks should not restrict one’s ability to breathe while working. Employees should notify their supervisor and/or Safety Officer if wearing a mask presents a health and safety concern or impedes their vision when conducting a work activity.

Cloth masks do not need to be worn when eating or drinking. They also do not need to be worn outdoors when sustained physical distance can be maintained from others. If employees are engaging in activities which pose a risk of heat stress and physical distancing cannot be maintained, then a face shield can be worn as an alternative face covering.

Employees and students must have a cloth mask in their possession at all times and immediately don it prior to entering buildings or otherwise coming into close proximity to other individuals.

Universal masking is also not required when working alone. Examples include:
• Being isolated in a vehicle or inside an enclosed construction vehicle cab
• Working alone within an office or classroom with four walls and a door
• Working alone within a cubicle with three walls and a door or entryway, with walls high enough to block the breathing zone of persons walking by, and the worker’s activity will not require anyone to enter the worker’s space.
• Working alone in an agricultural field or other open area with no anticipated contact with others.
Note: Consult Penn State EHS with questions concerning specific work environments, or conditions which may necessitate further evaluation.

REFERENCES:

CDC – Cloth Face Covers
PA Department of Health – Guidance on Homemade Masks during COVID-19
PA Department of Health – Updated Order Regarding Universal Face Coverings
PA Department of Health – Public Health Safety Measures for Businesses
CDC Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People (May 13, 2021)
Penn State Health Guidelines (May 14, 2021)
PS Health Guidelines – Masking (May 14, 2021)

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