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, face masks are critical components in helping to maintain the health and safety of the entire campus community. Masks made of fabric and cloth are not considered Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). However, these masks can be an effective complement to vaccinations, 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. Face coverings limit the wearer from spreading infectious droplets in their air. Face coverings will prevent those who may be infectious but only mildly symptomatic or non-symptomatic from spreading the virus to others.

UNIVERSAL MASKING REQUIREMENTS: Due to the rapidly evolving COVID-19 conditions around the country and in Pennsylvania, Penn State will require all students, faculty, staff and visitors — including those who are vaccinated and unvaccinated — to wear masks indoors at all campuses and Penn State operated facilities. This guidance does not apply to Penn State Health and the College of Medicine which have implemented specific guidance for their community.

These updated Penn State masking requirements (January 7, 2022) are provided in response to the increased spread of the omicron variant. This 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.

INSTRUCTIONAL MASK PROGRAM: In support of Penn State’s academic teaching programs, additional procedure masks and clear masks are made available for specific instructional settings as outlined on the Penn State Keep Teaching health and safety website. Based on an evaluation by the Penn State Graduate Program in Acoustics, procedure masks are being provided to all instructors as they were identified to affect speech less than cloth masks. Procedure masks are also provided in specialty laboratory settings. Clear masks are provided in support of language and communication courses where visibility of facial expression is needed. Clear masks are also provided in support of Student Disability Resources.

RESERVE MEDICAL N95 RESPIRATORS FOR HEALTHCARE AND REQUIRED OPERATIONS: Medical 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. Use of N95 respirators at Penn State must be coordinated with EHS in accordance with the University’s OSHA Respiratory Protection program.
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.

• Multi-layered procedure masks or KN95 masks are preferred; cloth masks made of multi-layered, washable, breathable fabric are sufficient if those are not available.

• Masks are to meet the following guidelines:
  • Should be well-fitting, sitting snugly over your mouth and nose, with no gaps.
  • Should cover your mouth and nose completely.
  • Should have a nose wire to prevent air from leaking from the top of the mask.
  • Should be dry. If you've participated in physical activities that have led to perspiration, or if your mask has otherwise become damp, replace it immediately with a clean, dry mask that meets requirements.
  • Should allow for breathing without restriction.

• As per CDC guidance, face shields and 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).Scarves, ski masks, bandanas and balaclavas are not substitutes for masks. Evidence shows that single-layer face coverings, including many neck gaiters, are not as effective in stopping respiratory droplets as multi-layer face coverings. If wearing a gaiter, ensure it has two or more layers, or fold it to make two layers.

• 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.

• 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: CDC guidance suggests that double-masking may improve facial coverage and wear for the user. This is effective with a procedure mask worn beneath a cloth mask. Double-masking with two procedure masks is not advised. Double-masking should not be done if it creates breathing difficulty. The below CDC reference “Improve How Your Mask Protects You” provides clarifications.

EXCEPTIONS FOR WEARING FACE COVERINGS:

• Cloth masks are not required when outdoors regardless of vaccination status.
• Cloth masks do not need to be worn when actively eating or drinking. It is recommended that eating and drinking be done at individual’s desk, outdoors or in designated food service areas.
• Cloth masks are not required when working alone. Examples include:
  o Driving alone in a vehicle or inside an enclosed construction vehicle cab
  o Working alone within an office, laboratory or classroom with four walls and a doorway
  o Working alone and seated within a “tall” cubicle with three walls (5’ or higher) and a door or entryway. Note standing in a cubicle including working at a standing desk requires masking.

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Doors, if available, to these spaces are required to be closed when unmasked. If individuals in these spaces welcome visitors, it is acceptable to leave door open slightly to acknowledge availability to enter the space.

- If a medical or other condition may affect an individual’s ability to wear a mask, individuals must consult with University Health Services (for students) or Occupational Medicine (for employees) to request reasonable accommodations on a case-by-case basis.
- 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. If employees are engaging in activities which pose a risk of heat stress then a face shield can be worn by employees as an alternative face covering. Consult EHS with questions concerning specific work environments, or conditions which may necessitate further evaluation.

REFERENCES:
Your Guide to Masks -(previously Cloth Face Covers) (CDC) (Oct. 25, 2021)
Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People (CDC) (July 28, 2021)
Types of Masks and Respirators (CDC) (Jan. 14, 2022)
Improve How Your Mask Protects You (CDC) (Apr. 6, 2021)
Making Masks for the Workplace (CDC/NIOSH) (May 18, 2021)
Penn State News - masking update (January 7, 2021)
Penn State Policy – AD101 COVID-19