



OVERVIEW: This document provides general guidance on the use and care of cloth masks and other approved face coverings. This document has been updated to align with the March 21st Penn State News article [“With COVID-19 cases lower, Penn State to adjust masking, testing protocols.”](#) This guidance goes into effect on March 23rd and face coverings will be optional in all indoor spaces, except in areas where the law requires them to be worn. [Additional Penn State FAQs](#) on this and other related topics are available on the Penn State COVID website.

CDC COVID-19 COMMUNITY LEVEL UPDATES: The [CDC has updated its guidance](#) to evaluate COVID-19 impacts on health and healthcare systems. The CDC then applies these metrics to assign COVID-19 Community Level ratings (i.e., Low, Medium or High) to respective counties to help communicate expectations including masking and other COVID mitigation requirements. Each Penn State campus and work location is expected to refer to their respective county’s COVID-19 Community Level rating and use the following matrix to confirm face covering requirements.

For the sole purpose of face covering guidance, the following matrix is adapted from the CDC guidance and Penn State AD101 Policy.

Campus Setting	COVID-19 COMMUNITY LEVEL		
	Low (Green Counties)	Medium (Yellow Counties)	High (Orange Counties)
COVID-19 Testing Centers, UHS, COM and other healthcare settings	Face coverings is required regardless of community level.		
Private offices and cubicles	Employees at Penn State who work in their own individual offices may request that visitors wear face coverings while in their private offices , and the University asks that community members cooperate with these requests.		
Research-related settings	Masking for all research locations will be optional, with the exception of some in-person human subjects research as outlined in the related FAQ .		Face coverings are required indoors unless otherwise meeting approved exceptions outlined in “EXCEPTIONS FOR WEARING FACE COVERINGS” portion of this resource
General masking indoors All indoor spaces unless required by law including classrooms, labs and other academic and creative spaces	Face coverings are optional based on your personal preference but encouraged in all other common indoor spaces	Individuals at high risk for severe illness are advised to talk to their healthcare provider about their individual need to wear a face covering. All others: face coverings are optional but encouraged in all other common indoor spaces	

FACE COVERING APPLICABILITY: *When face coverings are required, the following requirements and exceptions outlined in this resource are applicable.* 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.

PROCEDURE MASKS FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH: Procedure masks are also available at no cost to support human subjects research for researchers and participants. Contact your Pandemic Safety Officer if your research team wants to request these free procedure masks.

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.

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.
- Cloth masks are not required when working alone. Examples include:
 - Driving alone in a vehicle or inside an enclosed construction vehicle cab
 - Working alone within an office, laboratory or classroom with four walls and a doorway
 - 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.
 - 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:

[CDC Use and Care of Masks \(Feb. 25, 2022\)](#)

[CDC Types of Masks and Respirators \(Jan. 28, 2022\)](#)

[Penn State News - masking update \(March 21, 2022\)](#)

[Penn State Policy – AD101 COVID-19](#)