

FAQs for Cloth Face Coverings Worn by the Public

Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that we wear cloth face coverings in public. Especially in places where six feet of social distancing may be hard to maintain like the grocery store or pharmacy. The CDC suggests that wearing a simple cloth face covering may help slow the spread of the virus. There have been cases involving infected people who did not show symptoms. That means these asymptomatic virus carriers might have been spreading the virus through their coughs or sneezes. The reason for wearing cloth face coverings is not necessarily to protect the wearer, but to protect those nearby.

Wearing a cloth face covering DOES NOT take the place of social distancing or frequent hand-washing. Cloth face coverings are not the same as surgical masks or N95 respirator masks. Because of their specific purpose and intended use, these two types of medical-grade masks should be reserved for health-care workers and other front-line responders.

Regardless of which style of cloth face covering you choose to wear, the CDC advises that your cloth face covering meet five guidelines.

- Fits snugly but comfortably against the sides of your face and extends from the bridge of your nose to below your chin
- Secured with ties or ear loops
- Includes multiple layers of fabric
- Allows for unrestricted breathing
- Can be machine washed and dried without damage or change in shape

Here are answers to frequently asked questions regarding homemade cloth face coverings worn by the public.

Which pattern for sewing a homemade cloth face covering is the best?

Because we are not able to control the intended use of a cloth face covering, it is not appropriate for The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service to recommend or endorse a specific pattern as the “best” one. However, now that the CDC has published a pattern for a “sewn cloth face covering” with instructions, it would be wise to consult this pattern. Keep in mind the previously mentioned five guidelines before choosing your pattern. Be sure to distinguish between the two sides of the face covering. This will make it easy to remember which side of the covering you will be placing against your face.

How do I make a cloth face covering if I don't have a sewing machine or I don't know how to sew?

The CDC has given directions for two, no-sew cloth face covering options made with either a cotton bandana or a cotton t-shirt. Remember to refer to the CDC's guidelines beforehand to ensure that your cloth face covering is as effective as possible. Note that some instructions for cloth face coverings made from a knit t-shirt result in a single-layer barrier. Although this does not adhere to the CDC guideline that a face covering include “multiple layers of fabric,” it does give the public a low-cost or no-cost method for quickly making a face covering from common household materials.

What type of fabric is best for a homemade cloth face covering?

Ideally, you should use 100% cotton, “tightly woven” or “quilting cotton” fabric to make a cloth face covering. Patterns recommend cotton because of its durability, breathability, and comfort.

Two layers of cotton fabric are recommended, and some patterns include an opening to insert a third “filter” layer in between (see filter information below). The layer of fabric that is against the face can be made of a soft, woven cotton flannel for comfort. The use of new bed sheets with a high thread count (300 or more) is suitable for either layer. Woven cotton fabrics such as “denim,” “canvas” or “duck” are also fine to use, as long as two layers do not limit breathing.

You shouldn't use fabrics made with fancy yarns or embellishments because they will not withstand the recommended frequent machine washing and drying. Woven cotton fabric should be new or less than a year old. However, the main consideration is that the fabric is not so old that it is damaged, degraded, worn out, tattered, or threadbare. If you use a knit cotton t-shirt fabric, try to use a newer t-shirt and one that is made from a heavier weight cotton that feels thicker in your hands.

Fabric should be machine washed and dried before making your cloth face covering.

How can I tell if my fabric is 100% cotton?

If the fiber content is not printed on the edge of your fabric, you can figure it out with a common “burn test.” Only adults should do this in a carefully controlled, well-ventilated environment. The best place to do this is outside near a water source or over a kitchen sink. Remove paper or other flammable items from the area. Place a piece of foil underneath your fabric specimen to catch ashes. Remove a small piece of the fabric (less than 1 square inch), hold the piece firmly with metal tweezers or metal tongs, and carefully light the corner with a match or lighter. Let the piece to burn for 1 or 2 seconds then remove and extinguish the flame. Cotton that is 100% will smell like burning paper or a campfire and produce a light-colored smoke and soft ash. It may continue to burn or smolder with an afterglow. If your fabric specimen “shrinks away” from the flame, melts, or “beads up,” it most likely contains polyester. If it does not easily ignite and smells like burning hair, it is probably wool. Wet the burnt piece of fabric and the ash to make sure you've completely extinguished the flame.

What can I use as an elastic substitute?

If you have run out of elastic to assemble your cloth face covering, and you are unable to buy or find more, there are a few creative ways to finish your project. Some common household items have the appropriate elastic, but before you “harvest” elastic, make sure you have permission! You can find alternatives in elastics from hair bands, fitted sheets, and the contents of bungee cords.

Under the current circumstances, where face covering supplies are not always easily or readily available, anything elastic that is comfortable to the touch, durable, washable, and can stretch and recover will probably work. Elastics should not be degraded or “dried out” and they should be able to withstand frequent washings. Note that when you cut some elastics, or pierce them with a needle and thread, you might compromise the elastic properties, so use care when making substitutions. When elastic is not available, you can use a pattern with ties for fastening the face covering.

Do not use balloons as an elastic substitute because of potential latex allergies and limited performance properties.

What can I use in the nose area to keep my cloth face covering secure against my face?

A wire along the top portion of your cloth face covering can improve the fit. Not all patterns include a nose wire, but if there is an opening for the insertion of a wire, refer to the pattern recommendation. With

supplies running low or unavailable, inventive wire solutions include floral wire, jewelry wire, pipe cleaners, plastic-covered twist ties, or even paper clips. Before adding a wire in your design, consider how washing and drying might affect the wire, as well as how the wire itself may affect the nose area of your face covering after you launder it. Some wire material will rust, degrade, or start to poke through the fabric after washing. Bending or filing the edge of the wire may help prevent “poke-through” issues. It might be better to make the wire removable for washing. Just make sure you clean the wire and let it dry before reinserting it into your clean face covering.

Should I include a “filter” in my cloth face covering? If so, what is the best material to use for a filter?

The CDC’s recommendations for cloth face coverings do not include a filter or middle layer requirement. The variety of filter materials available or recommended on social media can lead to the improper use of a cloth face covering or a false sense of security. Some suggested filter materials are harmful when inhaled or are simply ineffective. Medical-grade filter materials need to be reserved for health-care personnel or other first responders. But there are some filter-like materials available to the public with potential benefits that are not FDA-approved. If you really want to use a filter in your homemade cloth face covering, please remember these concepts.

Filter material should

- NOT restrict breathing and NOT make breathing difficult,
- be clean,
- be placed between layers of fabric to prevent inhaling filter materials,
- be removable and disposable, and
- be washable (if permanently sewn into the cloth face covering).

Suggested filter-like materials (carefully replace these if they get wet)

- HEPA-style vacuum bag (Caution: these can restrict breathing too much.)
- non-woven, light-weight interfacing
- non-woven, polypropylene material like that used in “non-shiny” reusable grocery bags
- unscented, untreated, clean electrostatic dusting wipe (like a Swiffer cloth)
- disposable “blue shop” towels
- coffee filters

Do NOT use

- dried disinfectant wipes or dried baby wipes,
- dryer sheets, or
- air conditioning filters or vacuum bags that contain fiberglass.

When and how do I wear a face covering?

Current CDC guidelines suggest that a cloth face covering worn in public settings (such as the grocery store or pharmacy) may help slow the spread of the coronavirus. Under normal conditions, you do not need to wear a cloth face covering while walking outside for exercise or staying inside your home. However, if you or a member of your household are infected with the coronavirus, or have been exposed to someone who is infected, ask your doctor about face covering guidelines. If you are working outside the home, check with your employer regarding their face covering policy.

Always wash your hands before and after you put on your face covering and before and after you remove it. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth while placing or removing your face covering. Your cloth face covering should cover the sides of your face and extend from the bridge of your nose to below your chin. To limit the risk of cross-contamination, do not “fidget with” or touch your cloth face covering while it is on. Remove your face covering if it becomes soiled with mucus or spit. For this reason, the CDC suggests that you have access to a second clean face covering. Remove your face covering “from behind” — untie and grasp the strings or unhook the ear elastics. Avoid touching the front of your face covering while removing.

How do I clean my cloth face covering?

Your cloth face covering should be washed frequently, depending on how often it is worn. Some sources suggest cloth face coverings should be washed immediately upon removal. Regardless, a cloth face covering that has been worn, should not touch other surfaces — place it in a bag or set it on a washable surface. The CDC indicates that cleaning your cloth face covering in a washer and dryer, using the hottest settings, is sufficient. Studies show that a water temperature close to 160 degrees F is preferred. Most household washers may not be able to reach that temperature, but that is okay, as long you select the “hot water” setting and use a laundry detergent. The agitation in the washer contributes to the removal of the virus. If you do not have access to a washer, hand wash your cloth face covering in hot water with soap, scrubbing both sides for at least 20 seconds. Rinse thoroughly and dry in the dryer or air dry if no dryer is available. Alternate recommendations are to place your cloth face covering in a pot of boiling water for about 5 minutes and swirl around, but repeatedly using this method can lead to premature degradation.

Remember, to *start* with clean hands and *end* with clean hands during this process.

DO NOT clean your cloth face covering in the oven, microwave, or dishwasher. This can lead to damage of the cloth face covering and your appliances.

How do I prevent my eyeglasses from fogging while wearing a face covering?

Eyeglasses may fog because when we exhale, the moisture in our breath may escape the top of our face covering and settle on the inside of the eyeglass lenses. The face covering needs to cover our nose, or it will be ineffective, so pulling the face covering below our nose is not an option! A properly fitted face covering that snugly goes over the nose and follows the curves of our cheeks below our eyes is ideal, but not always possible with homemade cloth face coverings. Tips to prevent eyeglass fog are to use an antifog spray on the inside of the lenses, or to make sure the lenses have been freshly cleaned with soap and water, and dried with a clean, lint-free cloth. Experienced mask wearers also suggest folding a clean tissue and placing it along the inside of the upper edge of the face covering to fill in gaps where your breath can escape. If you choose to do this, be careful not to touch your eyes or nose while making this adjustment, and make sure this does not compromise the fit of your face covering.

If I want to sew “facemasks” for a hospital or other facility, what should I do?

The CDC guidelines do not recommend the use of homemade masks for the health-care environment, unless no other options are available. However, in response to the current limited supply of medical masks, several health-care facilities and other organizations have begun reaching out to volunteers to sew cloth face coverings. Interested persons who can help with this effort should contact local organizations or health-care facilities that are coordinating this effort. Volunteers should sew and donate only what has been requested and should follow the specific instructions. Requested masks that feature an opening for an optional filter should be constructed as directed, and the filter material should only be included if a filter

specification is provided. Otherwise, it is up to the receiving health-care workers or facility to choose and insert the filter material. Each hospital or other facility may have different needs and specifications. Note that many requesting facilities ask that the fabric is washed before being sewn, and the volunteer wears their own face covering while making the specified face coverings in a clean environment.

References:

- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/cloth-face-cover.html>
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