

CLOTH FACE COVERINGS

SELECTION, USE AND MAINTENANCE

WHY WEAR A FACE COVERING during the COVID PANDEMIC?

A cloth face covering that covers both your mouth and nose is intended to protect those around you from being exposed to COVID that you may exhale. These covers are **not** intended to completely protect the wearer against inhaling the virus.

However, face coverings are an essential part of a three-step system to stop the spread of the virus causing COVID-19. **The more people wear these coverings while maintaining at least 6 ft physical separation and washing their hands in warm soap and water for at least 20 seconds, the better we can slow down the spread of this virus in our community and protect those who are most susceptible to its effects.**

Face coverings can include disposable paper “masks”, which should be thrown out (place into a lined trash can only, please, to protect custodial staff). This mask should only be worn one day, or changed out to a new one if it becomes wet and difficult to wear.

Cloth face coverings are reusable but do require laundering after being worn. There are many styles to choose from, including **structure, straps and fabric.**

The best face covering is the one that fits with the fewest gaps, but this may require purchasing a few to determine what works best for you. Once you find the ones that work, purchase enough to get you through to laundry day.

FABRICATION SELECTION

Cloth face coverings should be at least *two layers thick*. Some styles have extra pockets for you to insert additional layers of fabric and some have tighter weaves than others. It is preferred to have a tighter weave (on at least the internal layer). If you can see through the mask when holding it up to a window/light, it is probably made of fabrics that are too thin to perform its function of droplet collection. Another consideration is to make sure the fabric is soft to the touch to reduce itching and the desire to scratch your face when wearing the covering.

Cotton fabrics are cool, easy to clean and can be bleached, if need be. However, there might be some benefit for having at least one **polyester** layer, which might improve the face cover's ability to filter particles from the air. Face coverings made of at least one layer of athletic-gear type fabric might have improved static collection properties compared to cotton fabrics.

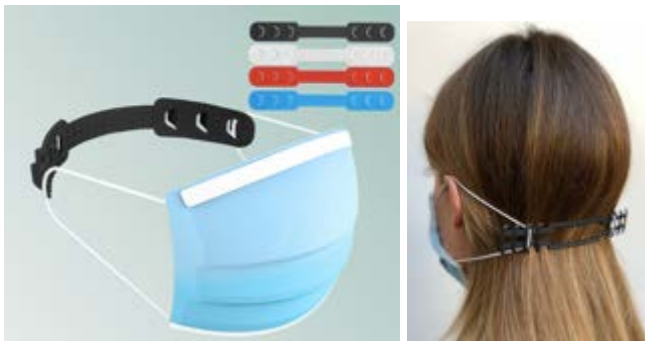
For cotton face coverings, selecting masks that have at least one internal layer of interfacing — a thin polyester non-woven layer, commonly used in sewing to give structure to fabric — might improve protection factors over unlined face covers. This thin interfacing layer may help serve as an electrostatic particle collector. Ask the seller if their cloth face covering was made by including an “interfacing” layer before purchasing, particularly for woven cotton face coverings.

Loose weaves, such as **linen**, are not recommended for face coverings if they have many large “holes” or gaps in the weave. If you select a linen face cover, which may look more stylish than a cotton one, make sure that the linen is on the “public” (outer) side of the face covering. There should be a tighter weave fabric on the inside fabric, and you should select three-layer face covers when one of the layers is linen.

FEATURES to CONSIDER

STRAP TYPES

Elastic that goes behind the ears: These are effective for light-weight covers, but after wearing for a long period of time, wearers have reported sore ears. If this is the type of face cover that you have stocked up but you now find them uncomfortable, look into **mask strap extenders** (below) that connect the two elastic straps behind your head, making the face covering more comfortable to wear.



Elastic that goes around the head: These covers are reported to be more comfortable, but if the elastic straps are too long, there will be gaps between the mask and the face. If the elastic is too long, it can be shortened by tying a knot in the elastic.



Ties that go around the head: These allow for maximum adjustment. The tie may be a single tie, where the bottom has to slip over your head and then the mask is tied to the top (below left). Or, it can have a tie at the bottom and a tie at the top (below right). You may find you need to tighten after you wear it for a while, to keep it from falling now that you have stretched the straps.



NOSE CLIP

Some face covers have either an exterior nose clip (visible on the outside, below right) or may have an inside pocket that has a removable pipe-cleaner or other thin bendable metal to adjust the fit at the nose (below left). If you wear eyeglasses, you will find that when you exhale and air leaks at the top of these covers, above your nose, your glasses will fog up. To prevent this, you want to make sure your face cover has a nose clip so you can tighten the mask here. These thin metal strips are bendable and allow you to press (simultaneously on both sides of your nose) to fit the mask close to your face at the top of your nose, reducing the gap at the top of the mask. Not every mask has a metal nose clip, but it is a feature to look for if the mask is not particularly shaped to the face (such as a flat surgical-style mask shown in the “ear strap” elastic image, above) or if you wear glasses.

Some parents recommend selecting face coverings for children that do not have a nose clip, as children were observed to complain less about comfort when the nose clip was gone.



Nose Wire
Pocket - inside



External Nose
Clip on cloth

SHAPE

Flat (below) face covers tend to have more gaps than a shaped mask, which is curved to fit the nose and extend under the chin. The gaps on flat masks tend to be at the side of the face; sometimes the pleating in these flat masks allows the wearer to pull the mask into shape to minimize these gaps. You should know how to adjust the flat mask to minimize side gaps and to cover the chin in a way that does not cause the mask to move downward when talking.



Formed (below) face covers are made using curved shape or darts to better fit your nose. These shapes, if you get the right size for your face, minimize gaps under the chin and at the ear.



WHAT ABOUT GAITERS, BALACLAVAS, and BANDANAS?

Any cloth item that covers the mouth and nose should help reduce the potential spread of the coronavirus.

The **balaclava** might be too warm to wear outside on hot days or inside buildings, and those wearing **gaeters** may also become overheated. When selecting these type of face coverings, the same recommendations for fabric are made: two layers (and these are likely going to be knitted, so there will probably be no inner layer), make sure you can wear it so your nose/mouth remain covered when talking.



Bandanas are also allowable, but traditional bandanas (a square fabric, folded into a triangle and tied around the head) do leave a lot of gaps. The bandana wearer is cautioned that this might not be as efficient as other face covering styles. There are fashionable bandanas that have ear straps and extend to the neck (see below, center and right). This might have a better seal compared to the tied triangle bandana. The extension to cover the neck and rest on the chest would help keep aerosols generated by the wearer out of the room's air.



HOW MANY DO I NEED? HOW DO I CLEAN THEM?

Regardless of what kind and how many cloth face coverings you use, you must wash them regularly. If you wear one for only an hour or two, you could allow it to dry out and use it again later. But if you are wearing it for any substantial amount of time, you do need to launder it before using it again.

You should anticipate that breathing through your mask is going to trap moisture in it, and you may find that you want to change your mask to a dry one later in the day. Swapping to dry face coverings throughout the day may also reduce skin breakouts. For this reason, you may want to wear one mask and bring along another one to swap into. Before leaving home, put your clean face coverings into a clean resealable bag (e.g., Ziploc). Bring along another bag (designate it as “Dirty”) and put your used face covering into this bag, seal it, and remember to take it home.

Before putting on your clean mask, make sure your hands are cleaned and then open the “Clean” bag and put on the face covering. Seal the “Clean” bag and you can reload a clean face cover into it tomorrow at home. By following this method, you can reuse the “Clean” and “Dirty” bags for a long time.

When you are “done” with a face covering on any day, place your mask(s) in a laundry “bin” (separate from other clothing, away from food, etc.) and accumulate your face coverings until laundry day. These covers should be washed using soap and hot water -- check laundry instructions from the mask maker; hot soap and water should be good for any homemade cotton face coverings. Using the dryer will kill any remaining coronavirus, which does not survive in hot/humid environments. **HOWEVER**, do NOT simply throw dirty face coverings in the dryer to “sterilize” them: we need to get rid of any bacteria that may grow on these masks too, and this does require full washing.

Because of the need to launder these reusable masks, you should make sure you have enough to get you through to laundry day. As a place to start, figure you will need two face covers per day (you may find you are more comfortable changing it more often, that is fine, just make sure you have enough on hand during the day). If you do laundry once per week, you will need: $2 \times 7 + 1 = 15$ covers. Note that the “+1” is for the one you may need to wear when doing laundry if you don’t have a private laundry room. Laundry every other week will require you to have 29 covers. If you do laundry once a month, you will need a much larger supply of covers: $31 \times 2 + 1 = 63$ covers. (At \$5-15 per face covering, this is going to be expensive).

You can launder your face covering with other clothing with two exceptions. First, do not wash your cloth face covers with another person's face covers. Second, launder your face covers *separately* from underwear and body towels to avoid transfer of fecal material to your face covering—that is really the last thing you want on your face.

If you have additional questions on how to select cloth face coverings, or any additional guidance to provide, please contact us at cph-greatplains@uiowa.edu.