



# RCAB Office of Risk Management

## Facts *about* ... Using Facemasks & Respirators

### ▷ Summary

Guidelines for the use of facemasks and respirators during a pandemic will vary according to the stage of the pandemic, the particular strain of virus, and the setting. Recommendations for schools and parishes, for example, will differ from those of health care facilities. To be adequately prepared for any scenario, the Office of Risk Management recommends maintaining a supply of facemasks and respirators as part of your preparedness planning.

### ▷ What is a facemask?\*

Facemasks are loose-fitting, disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth. These include products labeled as surgical, dental, medical procedure, isolation, and laser masks.

Facemasks help stop droplets from being spread by the person wearing them. They also keep splashes or sprays from reaching the mouth and nose of the person wearing the facemask. They are not designed to protect you against breathing in very small particles.

Facemasks should be used once and then thrown away in the trash.

### ▷ What is a respirator?\*

A respirator (for example, an N95 or higher filtering face piece respirator) is designed to protect you from breathing in very small particles, which might contain viruses. These types of respirators fit tightly to the face so that most air is inhaled through the filter material. To work most effectively, N95 respirators must be specially fitted for each person who wears one (this is called “fit-testing” and is usually done in a workplace where respirators are used). N95 respirators are most commonly used in construction and other jobs that involve dust and small particles. Some healthcare workers, such as nurses and doctors, use these types of respirators when taking care of patients with diseases that can be spread through the air.

If you have a heart or lung disease or other health condition, you may have trouble breathing through respirators and should talk with your doctor before using one.

Like surgical masks, N95 respirators should be worn only once and then thrown away in the trash.

## ▷ General Guidelines

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) issued the following interim guidelines for the use of facemasks and respirators in general public settings during an influenza pandemic:

- Whenever possible, rather than relying on the use of facemasks or respirators, close contact and crowded conditions should be avoided during an influenza pandemic.
- Facemasks should be considered for use by individuals who enter crowded settings, both to protect their nose and mouth from other people's coughs and to reduce the wearers' likelihood of coughing on others. The time spent in crowded settings should be as short as possible.
- Respirators should be considered for use by individuals for whom close contact with an infectious person is unavoidable. This can include selected individuals who must take care of a sick person (e.g., family member with a respiratory infection) at home. Facemasks and respirators should be used in combination with other preventive measures, such as hand hygiene and social distancing, to help reduce the risk for influenza infection during a pandemic.

## ▷ Guidelines for Schools

In a pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) will issue and update guidelines for the use of facemasks and respirators in schools. During the previous swine flu pandemic, when the alert level was at Phase Five, the U.S. Department of Education issued the following recommendation:

- If someone is coughing and sneezing and is suspected of being infected with H1N1, mask use should be considered. But masks do not entirely prevent the spread of viruses, particularly if they are not fitted to the person wearing it. Students and staff with flu-like symptoms or confirmed cases of the flu should isolate themselves at home. School nurses or those caring for sick students may want to consider wearing respirators.

In addition, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health issued the following guidance for schools and child care facilities:

- Screen students and staff as they enter school, during homeroom, or other appropriate times to identify anyone with fever and symptoms of influenza-like illness. Any child that appears to have ILI should be isolated and sent home. If the ill student or staff member has a cough, as well as fever, he/she should wear a mask (if available) until leaving the school to decrease the spread of the virus.

## ▷ Ordering Supplies

Based on the above guidelines, the Office of Risk Management recommends that schools have a supply of facemasks and respirators on hand in the event of a pandemic.

Please visit our website for vendor recommendations and pricing information:  
[www.rcabrisk.org/other-resources/pandemic](http://www.rcabrisk.org/other-resources/pandemic).