FAQs for Using a Medical or Non-Medical Mask


What is meant by "non-medical masks"?

A “non-medical mask” refers to various forms of self-made or commercial, disposable or reusable masks or face coverings made of cloth, other textiles or other materials. Neck gaiters, scarves, bandanas, clear plastic mouth shields, and masks with exhalation valves are NOT acceptable as a "non-medical mask".

What is the difference between a medical and non-medical mask??

A non-medical mask can include a non-medical disposable mask, or self-made or commercial cloth mask, made of at least 2 layers. Medical masks refer collectively to "Surgical masks", "Isolation masks" or "Procedural masks". Medical masks used in Canada and the United States are typically classified by the American Society for testing and Materials (ASTM) as "Level 1", "Level 2" and "Level 3". Many commercially available "non-medical disposable masks" have a similar appearance to medical masks, but they have not been evaluated or tested to ASTM standards and are therefore considered to be "non-medical masks".

It is difficult to distinguish between "medical masks" and "non-medical disposable masks" by appearance since medical masks typically do not come with markings on the mask itself. To confirm if a mask is a "medical mask", check the original box for specific wording: "ASTM" AND "Level 1", "Level 2" or "Level 3".

When should I use a medical mask?

Faculty, staff and students who must work at a distance of less than 2 metres from others, are required to wear medical masks. Please refer to Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) guideline for "COVID-19: Working in Close Contact (less than 2 metres of others)" [3] for details on this requirement, including the difference between medical masks and non-medical masks.

What do I do if I feel sick?

If you feel sick, do not come to campus - follow the steps on our I Have Tested Positive for COVID-19 or Feel Sick page [4]. Employees should follow their department's process for reporting absences and complete the Self-Declaration Form [5] on the University's website.

Students should inform their course instructor about any missed work and contact Student Health Services for guidance at x 52131 to speak with the nurse. Further information is available on the Student Wellness website [6].

When do I need to wear a non-medical mask?

Masks must be worn when indoors including in cubicles, classrooms, hallways, washrooms, stairways, meeting rooms and other common spaces. masks are also required when outdoors and unable to maintain 2 metres of distance from others. These requirements align with regulations and guidelines from public health authorities, including the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health (WDGPH) Section 22 Class Order [7].
When can I remove a non-medical mask??

Under certain limited circumstances, it may be acceptable to remove a mask while:

- working alone in a private office with the door closed (others are not present)
- eating or drinking while maintaining 2 metres of distance
- exercising during a booked appointment in designated areas of the Athletics Centre
- Outdoors and able to maintain 2 metres from others
- child under the age of 5

Why do I need to wear a non-medical mask?

When worn properly, non-medical masks can reduce the spread of the user’s own infectious respiratory particles.

Wearing a face covering complements (but does not replace) the following measures that prevent the spread of COVID-19 between people:

- Complete the University of Guelph COVID-19 Daily Screening Form [8] every day before coming to U of G campuses.
- If you feel sick, do not come to campus – follow the steps on our [I Have Tested Positive for COVID-19 or Feel Sick page [4].
- Maintain physical distance of at least 2 metres and/or a physical barrier between individuals.
- Avoid crowded poorly ventilated spaces.
- Wash your hands often and use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue or your elbow.
- Frequently clean and disinfect shared space, especially high-touch surfaces.

“I feel confident in my immune system” and “I’m not sick”, why should I be required to wear a non-medical mask?

Currently, Public Health agencies state the following:

1. There is evidence of community transmission of COVID-19 and COVID-19 Variants of Concern in Ontario, including in the jurisdiction of the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit. Additionally, the Medical Officer of Health of the Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Health Unit issued an order requiring face coverings (i.e., medical or non-medical masks) be worn in many establishments.
2. COVID-19 can be transmitted from persons who have minimal or no signs or symptoms of illness.
3. When worn properly, a person wearing a non-medical mask can reduce the spread of his or her own infectious respiratory particles.

Without any signs or symptoms of illness, you can be infected with the virus and transmitting it to others who might be more at risk of getting an infection and developing severe complications. We ask everyone at the University of Guelph to play an important role in helping to prevent others, especially vulnerable populations, from getting or spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Are non-medical masks a safe and effective way to prevent COVID-19?
Non-medical masks alone will not prevent the spread of COVID-19. You must consistently and strictly adhere to other preventative measures such as:

- proper hand hygiene;
- respiratory etiquette when coughing or sneezing;
- physical distancing whenever possible; and,
- Avoid crowded poorly ventilated spaces.

When worn properly, a person wearing a non-medical mask can reduce the spread of his or her own infectious respiratory particles.

Non-medical masks do not provide complete protection against viral particles because of a potential loose fit and the materials used but are shown to be more effective than not using a non-medical mask at all.

Who should not wear a non-medical mask?

People whose ability to breathe is inhibited in any way by the face covering, or people that have any other medical condition, disability, or impairment that prevent them from wearing a non-medical mask safely. More information can be found through WDG Public Health Class Order [9].

What should I do if I can’t wear a mask due to a medical condition?

If you have a medical condition, disability, or impairment that affects your ability to wear a mask and need accommodation, please contact:

Employees: Occupational Health and Wellness (OHW) at ohw@uoguelph.ca [10], and notify your supervisor. Please note that employees are not required to disclose their specific medical condition to their supervisor.

Students: Student Health Services at 519-824-4120, x 52131 and notify your Advisor/Instructor.

What happens if I don’t want to wear a non-medical face mask, is it mandatory?

Masks must be worn when indoors, including in cubicles, classrooms, hallways, washrooms, stairways, meeting rooms and other common spaces. Masks are also required when outdoors and unable to maintain 2 metres of distance from others. The requirement will apply to everyone who is 5 years or older and does not have trouble breathing or a medical condition that impacts the ability to wear the mask. If you have a medical condition that impacts your ability to wear a non-medical mask and are an employee, please contact Occupational Health & Wellness at ohw@uoguelph.ca [10] and notify your Supervisor. If you are a student, please contact Student Health Services at 519-824-4120 ext. 52131 and notify your Advisor/Instructor.

What type of non-medical masks should be worn?

A non-medical mask can include a non-medical disposable mask, or a self-made or commercial cloth mask, made of at least 2 layers. Non-medical masks must cover the mouth, nose and chin in order to provide a barrier that limits the transmission of infectious respiratory particles.

If you are working with hazardous materials (e.g. biohazards, chemicals, or nuclear substances, etc.), disposable masks are to be used unless a respirator (e.g., N95 filtering facepiece, half facepiece or full facepiece) is required as part of assigned personal protective equipment and has been approved for performing the work safely. A respirator requirement takes priority over wearing a non-medical mask.
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Can I wear a bandana or scarf in place of a non-medical mask?

In accordance with the WDGPH Section 22 order, bandanas and scarves are NOT acceptable forms of non-medical masks. A mask that covers the mouth, nose and chin, ensuring a barrier that limits the transmission of infectious respiratory particles must be worn.

Can I wear a mouth shield in place of a non-medical mask?

No, according to the information from WDG Public Health [11], mouth shields is not an appropriate alternative to a mask as the mouth shield does not fit snugly around around the mouth, nose and chin. Mouth shields allow infectious respiratory particles to spread outside the shield, and do not help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Can I wear a mask with exhalation valves in place of a non-medical mask?

No, according to Public Health Agency of Canada [12], masks with exhalation valves or vents allow infectious respiratory particles to spread outside the mask. These masks do not protect others from COVID-19 or limit the spread of the virus.

What about using face shields instead of masks?

Public Health agencies have not recommended face shields as a substitute for non-medical masks. However, there is evidence that face shields may provide some protection for eyes, nose, and mouth for the wearer. Face shields do not provide full coverage of the mouth, nose and chin. However, a face shield is better than no non-medical mask, especially for those whose ability to breathe in any way is inhibited by a mask or for people that have a diagnosed medical reason they cannot wear a non-medical mask safely but may be able to wear a shield. Contact Environmental Health and Safety at ehs@uoguelph.ca [13], to discuss the use of face shields as necessary. For any medical concerns, contact Occupational Health and Wellness at ohw@uoguelph.ca [10] if you are an employee. If you are a student, please contact Student Health Services at 519-824-4120 ext. 52131. A face shield or goggles, in conjunction with a medical mask is considered COVID-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) and is required for employee groups in specific work settings with close contact with others (where no barriers are present) and/or potential positive cases. Please refer to the EHS Guideline COVID-19: Working in Close Contact (less than 2 metres of others) [3] for more information regarding the use of face shields in these situations.

Will the University be providing non-medical masks?

The University has secured a limited supply of non-medical masks that can be purchased by departments from the Physical Resources Stockroom [14].

Individuals are also permitted to wear their own non-medical mask provided it is appropriate for the workplace and in good condition (e.g. properly laundered, not torn or tattered).

When working with hazardous materials disposable masks will be required.

How often should I launder a cloth or non-medical mask?

It’s recommended to wash your reusable non-medical mask after each use. You can wash it with your regular laundry on the warmest water suitable for the material, and dry on the highest heat setting or air dry, including putting it in direct sunlight if possible. Disposable masks should not be washed. Please refer to WDG Public Health
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[15], for more in-depth laundering practices.

What if I forget my non-medical mask at home?

The University will have limited supplies available if you forget your non-medical mask at home and you will be required to wear a University supplied mask. Please connect with your supervisor.

Should people wear medical masks or N95s?

Public health agencies continue to recognize will-fitting, properly work 2- and 3-ply non-medical masks as an effective source control and protection from COVID-19 and its variants, and non-medical masks continue to be acceptable in place and workplace settings.

Faculty, staff and students who must work at a distance of less than 2 metres from others, are required to wear medical masks. Please refer to Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) guideline "COVID-19: Working in Close Contact (less than 2 metres of others)" [3] for details on this requirement, including the difference between medical masks and non-medical masks. Due to supply concerns during COVID-19, surgical masks and N95s should be preserved for health-care workers whenever possible, unless it is required for the performance of your job duties. N95s require fit-testing and approval by EHS.

Public Health authorities in Canada have not recommended respirators (e.g., N95) for use against COVID-19 in non-health care settings. An N95 respirator is a respiratory protective device designed to achieve a tight facial fit and efficient filtration of airborne particulate. The users of respirators at the University of Guelph are subjected to requirements of our Respiratory Protection Program [16], including health screening, annual fit testing, and training. Participants of the program must continue to wear the respirator required to perform the work task as the respirator requirement takes priority over wearing a medical or non-medical mask.

What do I do if someone in my area is not wearing medical or non-medical mask consistently when they are required to?

Please note that under certain limited circumstances, it may be acceptable to remove a mask while:

- Working alone in a private office with the door closed (others are not present)
- Eating or drinking while maintaining 2 metres of distance
- Exercising during a booked appointment in designated areas of the Athletics Centre
- outdoors and able to maintain 2 metres from others

If the person does not wear a medical or non-medical mask consistently when they are required to, please notify your supervisor or contact Environmental Health and Safety at ehs@uoguelph.ca [13].

Do I still need to stay at least two metres (six feet) away from people if wearing a non-medical mask?

Yes, the use of a non-medical face mask is not a substitute for physical distancing which must be adhered to wherever possible.

Can I remove my non-medical mask if physical distancing can be maintained and predicted?

In outdoor environments, non-medical masks can be removed if physical distancing of 2 metres can be maintained from others. However, non-medical masks must be worn when indoors, including in cubicles, classrooms, hallways, washrooms, stairways, meeting rooms and other common spaces, even when you can maintain physical distancing.
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from others. Masks can be removed under certain circumstances such as when working alone in a private office with the door closed, eating or drinking while maintaining 2 metres of distance, or exercising during a booked appointment in designated areas of the Athletics Centre.


What is the proper way to safely put on and remove a non-medical mask?

The University’s COVID-19: Guidance for Using Non-Medical Face Masks [2] outlines the appropriate steps for putting on and removing a face mask.

Will non-medical mask requirements be enforced?

Yes. All members of the University community will be required to wear medical or non-medical face masks within these parameters. Members of the University community who demonstrate continued non-compliance with this directive may be asked to leave campus. Supervisors will be enforcing these requirements with their employees, in consultation with HR and FASR. Employees who fail to properly utilize medical masks or non-medical masks when required to do so may be subject to disciplinary action. Faculty advisors and lab managers will similarly be monitoring compliance amongst the student body.

Are 3-layer non-medical masks preferred over 2-layer non-medical masks?

Recent information from Public Health Ontario (PHO) [17] indicates that consistent and appropriate use of either 2-layer or 3-layer non-medical masks continues to be a key factor in lower transmission rates of COVID-19.

All non-medical masks, whether 2- or 3-layer should

- completely cover the nose, mouth and chin without gaping
- allow for easy breathing
- not contain an exhalation valve
- fit securely to the head
- fit comfortably to avoid frequent adjustments
- maintain their shape after washing and drying

Can 3-layer non-medical masks be used as personal protective equipment (PPE)?

Commercially available or self-made disposable or re-useable 3-layer non-medical masks are not considered personal protective equipment (PPE) and must not be used in situations where PPE has been deemed necessary.

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