



Guidance for the use of masks

Mask wearing in the general community

While vaccination remains the most effective intervention for prevention of disease, the use of a mask is a simple and effective way to further reduce the risk of contracting and transmitting COVID-19.

A mask creates a physical barrier between the mouth and nose of the wearer and potential contaminants in the immediate environment. Masks also reduce the wearer's saliva and respiratory secretions from reaching others, which is particularly important if someone has any respiratory symptoms.

There are currently three types of recommended masks in WA for protection against transmission of COVID-19:

- single-use disposable surgical masks
- three-layered fabric masks, and
- particulate filter respirators (PFRs) (also known as P2 or N95 masks).

For most of the WA population living and working in the community, single-use disposable surgical masks are the preferred option. However, where surgical masks are unavailable, an acceptable alternative is a three-layered fabric facemask that is regularly washed.

Even in the community, mask use should form part of a suite of transmission mitigation measures which include hand hygiene, physical distancing, not touching one's face, nose, eyes and mouth, and good respiratory etiquette.

Mask wearing at work – general community

Surgical single-use disposable masks are the preferred option for the general community in the workplace. A three-layered fabric facemask is acceptable, provided it is regularly washed.

Employers need to undertake their own assessment to identify risk and consider options to reduce risk including whether any additional PPE is needed. As part of this process, consideration should also be given to the suite of other public health social measures in place, including hand hygiene, physical distancing, not touching one's face, nose, eyes and mouth, and good respiratory etiquette.

Mask wearing at work – healthcare settings

In health care settings, the use of PFRs is recommended during high-risk aerosol generating procedures, and for protection against infections known to be spread by the airborne route.

It is recommended that PFRs to be worn instead of a surgical mask if a risk assessment suggests a likely high risk of transmission, and that healthcare workers using PFRs should be trained in their correct use and fit tested. Further detailed advice around PFR use in healthcare settings is available from the Australian Government's [Infection Control Expert Group](#).

Mask wearing at work – high risk client-facing workplaces

Outside of healthcare settings, there are some situations where it may be appropriate for other occupational groups to wear PFRs, rather than a surgical mask. These settings include high-risk client-facing workplaces where it is highly likely that the worker will be exposed to a case or suspected case of COVID-19, and the environment is likely to be uncontrolled so that other mitigation measures, such as mask wearing by the case, are unable to be implemented or followed. This may include workers such as police, fire and other emergency services, correctional officers, quarantine or other security staff, and child protection workers.

When assessing whether PFRs should be used in these settings (in conjunction with other risk mitigation measures), employers should consider possible risks and unintended consequences, and whether PFR use is reasonably practicable as a mitigation approach.

Considerations should include:

- the need for fit testing, including whether services are available in a timely manner
- how much the risk will be reduced by PFRs compared to other masks
- restrictions on PFR efficacy associated with personal characteristics including facial hair and head coverings, and increased transmission risk from improper usage
- health risks associated with PFR use including 'PPE fatigue' and whether those risks can be reasonably mitigated in the specific operational environment (for instance by taking regular breaks).

In keeping with the "reasonably practicable" test under the OSH Act, employers should consider all the other measures already in place and take account of availability, cost and practicability as well as the government's health advice. Access to supply of PPE, any appropriate training and fit testing as needed are significant considerations in this assessment.

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