

N95 masks: A must-have with Omicron, but fakes abound

December 30 2021, by Steven Reinberg Healthday Reporter



You're watching the Omicron variant race around the world and think it

might be time to upgrade your mask to a gold-standard N95 or KN95 model. A quick search on Google should find you one, right?

Not so fast, experts say.

According to Anne Miller, executive director of the nonprofit group Project N95, the masks that offer the most protection are indeed the N95 and the KN95—both are approved by the U.S. government to block 95% of the new coronavirus.

But she warned that there are lots of counterfeits out there.

The U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) tests masks to be sure they meet the standards for what's called "filtration rate," she explained. As the pandemic began, lots of masks were submitted to NIOSH for approval as companies sought to cash in on surging demand.

Only a few succeeded.

"Some of those masks were like 20% filtration," Miller noted. In fact, "over 60% of the masks that were submitted did not pass NIOSH tests—they did not perform," she said.

"From my perspective as a consumer, I don't want to shell out my money and get something that I think is protecting me that isn't and then I have a false sense of security—and then I get sick," Miller added.

That doesn't mean that all imported N95 and the KN95 masks are junk. But they all have to meet NIOSH standards, Miller said.

Check the numbers

To be sure that any masks you buy is authentic, Miller advises consumers to look for the TC number on N95 masks. "It says TC—and then three more digits and then two digits and also a lot number," she said. Real N95 masks also come with a head strap.

For KN95 masks, Miller said the mask should say: "GB 2626—2019 then a space and then KN95. If it does not have that printed on the face of the mask, it is not made to the standard."

Also, the mask should have a brand name on it, Miller said. "When you see a mask that just says KN95 and no brand, you have no way to know who actually produced it, and that is not good."

Are there other warning signs that a mask might be fake?

Miller said one surefire clue is if the labeling claims the mask is FDA-approved or it's registered with the FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration).

"If you see the FDA logo on the box, if you see somebody marketing their product as FDA-approved, that is almost a guarantee that it is a substandard or counterfeit product," Miller said in a statement. "If you're registered, you've paid \$5,400 to be registered, and that's it ... the FDA website says that registration does not connote any sort of approval."

Also watch out for a mask with no markings at all, no NIOSH markings or NIOSH is spelled incorrectly, decorative fabrics and any claims of NIOSH approval for children (NIOSH does not approve respiratory products for kids).

Cost not a factor

Miller stressed that price is not an indicator as to whether a mask is the real thing or not: High-grade masks do not have to be expensive.

"You can buy a U.S.-made N95, NIOSH-rated respirator for 60 or 75 cents, so you don't have to spend a lot of money," she said.

It is important to change masks often, as they wear out and become less effective, Miller said. For most people, it's good to have several masks that can be rotated. Each mask is good for approximately 40 hours of wear, Miller said.

The trick with N95 and KN95 masks is maintaining a good seal. Many people may find an N95 uncomfortable, so they may be better off with a KN95, which has ear loops and may be easier to tolerate.

"They're not designed for comfort," Miller said. "They're designed for performance."

Fit is key

As for other masks, such as cloth ones, Miller says they can be used over a high-grade mask as a fashion statement or to keep a mask clean, but they really don't offer enough a lot of protection by themselves.

The best way to be sure you're getting a good mask is to buy them from a reliable source, Miller said.

Infectious disease expert Dr. Marc Siegel, a clinical professor of medicine at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City, stressed that "masks are not the end-all and be-all of protection."

They can help ward off infection, but they need to be worn properly and

changed frequently. "By worn properly, I mean a tight fit over the nose," Siegel said.

He acknowledged that N95 masks can be uncomfortable to wear and difficult to use, but KN95 or N95 masks do offer the best protection.

"When we say up your mask game, that means going to a KN95 or an N95," Siegel said.

More information: For more on face masks, see the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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Citation: N95 masks: A must-have with Omicron, but fakes abound (2021, December 30)
retrieved 6 May 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-n95-masks-must-have-omicron-fakes.html>

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