

Want to keep Omicron away? Wear a better mask, like the N95

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The contagious Omicron variant is straining Florida hospitals. Last week, the state averaged nearly 41,300 infections a day. The vaccinated are less likely to suffer serious illness, but can still get infected.

So what's the best way to keep Omicron away?

Adopting better masking practices, medical and [public health experts](#) say, will help curb the spread of the coronavirus.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines have changed over the course of the pandemic, the best strategy to protect against COVID-19 remains wearing a quality face mask and getting vaccinated.

In its latest recommendation, the CDC says people should wear the most protective masks available to them, that fit well and that they will wear consistently. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health-approved N95 masks offer the best protection on the market, experts say (look for the NIOSH label on the masks.)

"It's still true that any mask is better than no mask, yet there is huge variability in the effectiveness of different kinds of masks," said Linsey Marr, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Virginia Tech who studies airborne transmission of infectious diseases, in a statement. "While a simple cloth mask might provide 20 percent protection, a high-performance mask can achieve 90 percent protection or better."

Some researchers who have been studying COVID-19's transmission since it first spread in 2020 have been calling for widespread use of respirator masks, such as N95 and KN95 masks, for over a year.

"This is something we've been trying to get government and policy makers to understand since the very beginning," said Kristen Coleman, an assistant research professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Health.

"An N95 mask, no matter what variant it is, is always going to give you more protection," she said.

Limited supply in the [summer months](#) of 2020 meant even [health care](#) and front-line workers were unable to secure a steady supply of sturdy, high-performance masks. Now manufacturers are beginning to meet demand, making high-quality masks easier to find. The Biden administration plans to distribute 400 million N95 masks from the Strategic National Stockpile to pharmacies and health centers to give out for free.

In the U.S., N95 masks are the gold standard but "the most important thing is that it fits well," said University of South Florida immunologist Michael Teng. In order to protect yourself and others from infection, the mask must cover both your nose and mouth and fit your face well.

Experts also caution that you buy masks from reputable sources and check that the N95 respirators you buy are NIOSH-approved and have an approval number that starts with TC on the packaging. The CDC has additional guidelines for spotting counterfeit masks.

Here's what you need to know about masks:

The CDC's Best Mask

The N95, named for its 95 percent filtration efficacy, is the CDC's top mask choice. The respirator mask uses microscopic fibers to catch particles and an electrostatic charge to filter them out. Authentic N95s have a strap that goes around the head and can be used more than once. Remember, it must fit snugly to be effective. They can be worn up to five times.

Next Best Mask

The KN95 and KF94 masks are also respirator masks but adhere to international standards, not CDC standards. The U.S. regulates N95 masks while KN95s are regulated by the Chinese government and KF94s by the South Korean government. All three share 95 percent filtration efficacy. But be warned: The CDC says that from 2020 to 2021, 60 percent of KN95 masks did not meet their own nation's standards. They must also fit well to work.

Double-mask

Those who only have access to cloth and surgical masks can combine them to make a better mask. Wear the surgical mask against your face, keeping the colorful side on the outside because it keeps liquids out. Then wear a cloth mask over it to tighten the seal and fit and to add a layer that could improve protection. But they should consider upgrading as soon as possible.

Still decent

Cloth masks made of "multiple layers of tightly woven, breathable fabric" are still recommended. But while the CDC says they offer "more protection" they do not offer the best protection. They must have a nose wire, fit properly and be clean. If you wear a gaiter, it should have two layers or be worn while folded into two layers.

Stop wearing

The CDC recommends no longer wearing single-layer cloth masks made of thin fabric. Single-layer gaiters are out. Masks with valves or vents are also out. You should avoid masks made of loosely knitted or woven

fabric, or that are made of plastic or leather and hard to breathe through. Face shields and goggles are no substitute for masks, but can be worn with them. Scarves and ski masks don't work, either. Remember: Masks that do not fit properly over your mouth and nose do not work.

Beware of knockoffs

Cheap, ineffective replicas of N95s, KN95s and KF94s have flooded the market since the pandemic began, especially online marketplaces like Amazon. Beware of strange or inconsistent prices. When buying online, look at user reviews; whether the company can be contacted; whether it lists other products for sale; whether it presents itself professionally or utilizes typos, bad grammar and bad graphics; whether the seller has a professional email address, or uses a free email server. The CDC offers advice for spotting knockoff masks.

Who should wear masks

- Everyone age 2 and up who is not vaccinated, or has not had all their vaccine shots, should wear it in indoor public spaces.
- There is generally no need to wear masks outdoors, but it should be considered among crowds in areas with high transmission rates.
- Fully vaccinated people with weak or compromised immune systems, or those who live with someone who has a weak immune system or is at risk of severe illness.
- Anyone who is around or caring for someone who has tested positive for COVID-19.
- The fully vaccinated should consider wearing [masks](#) in areas of high

transmission to prevent spreading the virus to others, and to protect themselves.

- Remember, wearing a mask doesn't just protect the wearer, but those around them. Masks work best when everyone is wearing one.

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