

# How to get the most out of your N95 mask or other respirator

February 24 2022, by Thea Van de Mortel, Peta-Anne Zimmerman

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Credit: Engin Akyurt from Pexels

Although mask mandates are [lifting in some states](#), many people will continue to wear masks to protect themselves and others from the more [transmissible](#) omicron variant.

For instance, they might be visiting a loved one in hospital, traveling on a plane or bus, or still need to wear one at work in hospitality or retail.

Any mask is better than none. However, a type of mask known as a respirator is [more effective](#) at preventing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID) than a cloth or surgical mask, provided you use it properly.

Here is a practical guide to getting the most out of your respirator.

## What is a respirator?

Respirators are designed to fit your face closely to help prevent you breathing in airborne particles through the gaps around the edges.

They are made of a plastic with an [electrostatic charge](#) that repels viral particles, preventing at least 95% of particles from getting through.

They are made to a specific [manufacturing standard](#). Depending on where they are certified, they [may be called](#) N95 (in the U.S.), P2 (Australia or New Zealand), FFP2 (Europe), KF94 (Korea) or KN95 (China).

Some have a cup shape; others look like a [duck bill](#) due to the way they stick out.

## Who can use a respirator?

Adults can use respirators but the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not [recommend them for children](#). That's because they are not designed for smaller face sizes so may not provide full protection.

Facial hair, unfortunately, [interferes with the fit](#). That's because the edge of the respirator cannot form a tight seal around the face and chin.

If you don't want to remove your beard or mustache, use a surgical mask. Or you can [double mask](#) by wearing a cloth mask over a surgical mask.

reminder that if you're starting wearing an N95 or similar high-filtration mask that they work significantly better if you remove your beard [pic.twitter.com/usuinUuStl](https://pic.twitter.com/usuinUuStl)

— Alan (@akgerber) [January 13, 2022](#)

## Which respirator is best?

This depends on personal preference and size. Try a few different types to find one that fits well. P2 respirators found in hardware stores are often in larger sizes that suit men. Chemists sell others that might better suit a smaller face.

Look for an adjustable nose piece and [straps that go over the back of the head](#) rather than loops that go over the ears. This will ensure a tighter fit.

Do not buy respirators with valves because they do not prevent the release of viral particles into the air.

## Watch out for counterfeits

Avoid a false sense of security when wearing respirators, as they won't have been professionally "fit tested" the way they would be for health workers.

When buying respirators online, look out for [counterfeit products](#). For

example, avoid individual respirators with unmarked packaging, or boxes with an FDA logo, as use of the logo to market products [is prohibited](#). The box should include the [manufacturer's name and address](#).

## How do I put one on?

The US [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) advises you:

- wash or sanitize your hands before putting on the respirator
- check the respirator for any tears, holes or moisture. Never use one that is damaged or wet
- separate the elastic straps, then hold the respirator in your hand with the nose piece at the top
- place the respirator over your nose and mouth
- place one elastic loop at the top of your head, near the crown, and the other at the base, below your ears. Make sure the straps lay flat, are not twisted and are not criss-crossed
- adjust the flexible strip across your nose and cheeks, pressing on each side of the nose with the fingertips of both hands to mold it to your face
- check the edges to make sure there are no creases or hair stuck under the edge
- perform a "[fit check](#)". Take a quick deep breath in, which should cause the respirator to suck inwards. Then breathe out, which should re-inflate it. If your glasses fog up, if you feel air coming in or going out around the edges, or the respirator does not suck in, there is not a good seal. Try repositioning it and "fit check" again
- sanitize your hands after putting on your respirator. Once on, avoid touching the front, which may be contaminated. If you do, sanitize your hands again.

## Can I re-use them?

While respirators are labeled for [single use](#), they can be reused outside health-care settings with care:

- the more you reuse a respirator the more likely it is to [fail](#) because the wear on the elastic straps causes a poorer fit or components break. Most are good for at least five wears but some can go for at least 20
- have several on the go and alternate them on different days. Store each one after use in its own paper bag, to allow it to dry out between uses
- remove the respirator if it gets wet. When removing, touch only the straps. Move the respirator away from your face so you don't contaminate your skin or hair
- when the respirator loses its fit, gets damaged or has been used too often, pop it in the bin.

## What not to do

- don't [wash or microwave](#) your [respirator](#). This interferes with its [electrostatic charge](#) and ability to [filter viruses](#)
- don't store it in a plastic bag as it will not dry out between uses.

Respirators reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 but will not stop it alone. It is essential to stay home if unwell, get fully vaccinated, physically distance where possible, regularly wash or sanitize your hands, and if coughing or sneezing, do so into your elbow.

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