COVID-19 - General Guidance for Wearing Masks

This guidance has been developed to assist Vermont municipalities in making decisions about the types of masks that should be used by employees and how they should be worn. This information is based on CDC guidance as of January 21, 2022.

In general, the CDC recommends that well-fitted masks be worn indoors in regions where there is “substantial or high transmission” of COVID-19. At the present time, this includes the entire state of Vermont. Additionally, current CDC guidance advises that Americans use “the most protective mask” that they can.

Desired Mask Characteristics

- Regardless of the type of mask material, the mask must fit well. Masks should have a bendable metal band over the nose to improve fit and should also fit well over the chin. Masks that result in gaps around edges of the face or nose should be avoided. The CDC has provided additional information on mask fit and fitting here.
- If cloth masks are used, they should consist of at least two layers. Alternatively, a surgical/disposable mask may be used with a cloth mask over the top to provide the additional filtering layer.
- Masks with improved filtration (such as KN-95 and N-95) are recommended because when fitted properly they provide better protection against the Omicron COVID-19 variant than cloth masks alone.
- For EMS personnel, the COVID-19 Emergency Temporary Standard for Healthcare requires that personnel wear surgical, medical procedure, dental, or isolation masks that are FDA-cleared, or authorized by an FDA Emergency Use Authorization, when around other personnel or in a vehicle. Under the current CDC guidance, these masks do not provide adequate protection against the Omicron variant, so it is desirable to upgrade masks to KN-95 or N-95.

Purchasing KN-95 and N-95 Masks

The CDC has advised that 60% or more of all KN-95 and N-95 masks on the market are fakes. NIOSH has shared information on confirmed counterfeits as it becomes available. With that in mind, here is some information that may be useful as municipalities seek to purchase these types of filtering facepiece respirators:

- KN-95 masks are not NIOSH certified and instead only meet Chinese certification standards. If a KN-95 mask says “NIOSH certified”, then it is certainly a counterfeit mask. While these masks are subject to counterfeiting, similar to N-95 masks, there are some that are of high quality. The challenge is having enough confidence in the vendor and “apparent manufacturer”.

• N-95 masks are NIOSH certified respirators. These may be made in the US and in other countries around the world. These are also subject to counterfeiting, though less so than KN-95 masks.

• CDC has provided some tips on how to avoid counterfeit KN-95 and N-95 filtering facepiece respirators.

• To have confidence about the quality of the masks that are purchased, we recommend purchasing N-95 masks made by US companies that manufacture the masks in the US. These may cost slightly more but having confidence in the product quality is worth the extra expense. Some tips include:
  o Consider made in the USA companies such as Moldex, 3M, Honeywell, Demetech, Armbrust USA, Aidway, and others.
  o There is no substitute for doing research on where the specific masks are made.
  o Masks advertised on Amazon include legitimate and counterfeit masks, so caution and research are recommended.

*In general, filtering facepiece respirators are not required to be fit tested under conditions of voluntary use (e.g. not required by VOSHA); however, where N-95 masks are used by emergency medical personnel to comply with the basic mask provisions of the COVID-19 ETS for Healthcare, employees should be provided with voluntary respiratory respirator information in Appendix D of 1910.134. If EMS personnel are performing aerosol producing procedures, then under that standard respirators must be used, so the full provisions of VOSHA 1910.134 apply.