



August 31, 2020

Guidance for Mask Use in Schools

Summary Highlights

- Wearing a mask is a tool that, in addition to practising public health fundamentals, may help prevent spreading COVID-19 to others, especially in indoor public spaces if physical distancing cannot be maintained.
- The evidence supporting the use of non-medical masks in the community continues to evolve.
- Wearing a mask alone will not stop the spread of COVID-19. People must continue to practise important public health fundamentals, including staying home when sick, practising proper hand-washing and cough etiquette, and practising physical distancing.
- At this time, non-medical masks are required in schools for students in Grades 4 to 12, as well as for staff and visitors, when physical distancing of two metres is not possible.
- Masks are required on school buses for bus drivers, students, and any other passenger on the bus.
- Parents/guardians/caregivers will choose whether students in Grade 3 and under will wear a mask while in school.
- In situations where there are split classrooms, such as a Grades 3/4 split classroom, all students in the classroom should wear a mask when physical distancing of two metres is not possible.
- Knowing how to wear a mask properly is critical to everyone's safety. An improperly worn mask will not protect others from respiratory droplets and can increase the wearer's risk of getting an infection.
- Schools will have masks available for those who do not have a mask or for those who have forgotten to bring a mask to school.

Why should one wear a non-medical mask?

Wearing a non-medical mask is a tool that, in addition to practising public health fundamentals, may help prevent spreading COVID-19 to others, especially in indoor public spaces such as schools, if physical distancing cannot be maintained. Wearing a non-medical mask does not protect the person wearing the mask, but it may help to protect the people around them.

People release respiratory droplets by sneezing, coughing, spitting, heavy breathing, singing, or talking. COVID-19 spreads mainly through close contact (within two metres or six feet) with an infected person's respiratory droplets. When worn properly, a person wearing a mask at school or on school buses may reduce the chance of their own respiratory droplets spreading to others or landing on surfaces. People may also get COVID-19 by touching a surface that has been contaminated by the virus and then touching their mouth, eyes, or nose.

Are there limitations with non-medical masks?

The evidence supporting the use of non-medical masks in the community continues to evolve. Presently, wearing non-medical masks in settings where physical distancing is not consistently maintained is a reasonable measure that may help prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is important to remember that wearing a non-medical mask alone will not stop the spread of COVID-19. To be effective, wearing a mask must be combined with practising good public health fundamentals. This means staying at home when sick, practising frequent and proper hand washing, covering coughs, and physical distancing from people outside of one's immediate household.

Non-medical masks are not like personal protective equipment (PPE) used in health care. PPE used in health care, such as medical masks and respirators, must pass standards and regulations to be used. Non-medical masks may not provide protection from germs because of the materials used or because they are loose-fitting. As well, they can become damaged or the fabric can break down with time or with washing, which will reduce the effectiveness of a non-medical mask.

Who should wear a non-medical mask?

At this time, masks are required in schools for students in Grades 4 to 12 as well as for staff and visitors, when physical distancing of two metres is not possible or cannot be consistently maintained. Parents/guardians/caregivers will choose whether students in Grade 3 and under will wear a mask in school. However, in situations where there are split classrooms, such as a Grades 3/4 split classroom, all students in the classroom should wear a mask when physical distancing of two metres is not possible, for the benefit of the other students and staff in the classroom.

Masks are required on school buses for bus drivers, students, and any other passenger on the bus.

Students in any grade may, or may not, be wearing a mask at school or on school buses, depending on their personal circumstances. It is important that children understand that no one should be treated differently for wearing a mask or for not wearing a mask. We're all in this together.

What should parents/guardians/caregivers teach their children about wearing a mask?

When masks are not worn properly, they will not prevent the spread of COVID-19 to others and may also put the person wearing them at greater risk of infection. That is why parents/guardians/caregivers should practise proper mask usage at home with their children and teach their children the following:

- Do not touch your mask or face while wearing it.
- Practise good hand hygiene while wearing the mask.
- Wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer immediately before putting your mask on and immediately after taking it off.
- Wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer immediately after touching or adjusting your mask.
- Do not share your mask with others.
- Do not dangle your mask from one ear, or pull it below your nose or mouth so it is only covering your chin.
- Change your mask as soon as it becomes damp or soiled.
- To remove the mask safely, remove it from behind using the ear loops. Do not touch the front of the mask. Note: Masks with ear loops rather than strings/ties should be used for students, especially younger ones, as strings/ties may be a choking hazard.
- Immediately after removing the mask, either throw it out (if a disposable mask) or place it directly into the washing machine or into a designated container/bag and then into the washing machine (if a reusable mask). Wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer immediately after removing the mask.
- Reusable masks must be washed after each use in the laundry machine's hot water cycle and then thoroughly dried.

To be effective, parents/guardians/caregivers must ensure their child's mask fits well and covers the nose, mouth, and chin without any gaps. Masks can become contaminated by droplets in the air or when touched by the hands of the person wearing the mask. This is why avoiding touching one's face while wearing a mask, and proper hand hygiene before putting on a mask, after taking off a mask, and after touching a mask are so important. It is important for parents/guardians/caregivers to ensure that their child's mask is comfortable and does not require frequent adjustments.

Visit the Health Canada website (at www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/video/covid-19-wear-non-medical-mask-face-covering-properly.html) for more information on how to wear a mask properly. The following Public Health Agency of Canada page

provides a poster and guidelines for how to safely use a non-medical mask or face covering: www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-safely-use-non-medical-mask-face-covering.html. For information on how to talk to children about wearing masks, visit the following Canadian Paediatric Society website: www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/non-medical-masks-and-face-coverings-for-children-during-covid-19.

Who should *not* wear a mask?

Children who cannot wear a mask properly, as described above, should not wear one. However, this can depend on the situation and on how long the mask is worn. For example, a child may be able to properly wear a mask for a five-minute bus ride but not for a two-hour bus ride or a full morning in class. Like any new routine, practising the proper usage of a non-medical mask at home and slowly increasing the duration of wear will allow children to become more comfortable with it, and they will then be more likely to follow the guidance on proper mask use.

In addition, non-medical masks should not be worn by anyone who

- is unable to remove the mask without assistance (e.g., due to age, ability, or developmental status)
- is actively having breathing difficulties
- is under two years of age

In general, most people with underlying medical conditions can safely wear a mask. There is no evidence that wearing a mask will worsen an underlying medical condition. For example, in most situations, an individual with an underlying lung condition such as asthma or an underlying heart condition can safely wear a mask.

If a parent/guardian/caregiver is concerned about their child's ability to safely wear a mask, they should speak with their child's doctor. If the child is either unable to properly wear a mask or has a medical condition that does not allow them to wear a mask, the parent/guardian/caregiver must provide written notification to the child's school outlining the child's limitations with wearing a mask. A note from a health-care provider is **not** required.

Some people would like to use a face shield instead of a mask, but a face shield is **not** a replacement for a non-medical mask.

What kind of non-medical mask should students wear?

Non-medical masks should be included in back-to-school supply lists for students and school staff this fall. To be effective, parents/guardians/caregivers should pay attention to the materials used. Not all masks are created equal. Homemade masks must be made of a minimum of two layers, use tightly woven material (e.g., cotton or linen), and fit securely with no gaps. Masks with ear loops are easier to put on and take off, and are recommended for younger students because ties/strings may be a choking hazard.

Further, reusable non-medical masks should not have any holes or valves that are open to the air. Holes or valves allow respiratory droplets to escape from the non-medical mask and decrease its ability to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is important for parents/guardians/caregivers to ensure their child's mask is comfortable and does not require frequent adjustments.

Lanyards that go around the child's neck and tie to the ear loops of the mask to keep the child from losing or misplacing it are not recommended because dangling a mask from one's neck contaminates the mask, and encourages the wearer to touch, adjust, and/or move the mask unnecessarily. Instead, students should use either a clearly labelled clean bag or a clean container to store their reusable mask when they need to remove them (e.g., at lunch time). Once a reusable mask has been removed, it should be washed before being worn again. See the next section for more details.

For students with a hearing impairment who need to see someone's mouth to communicate, there are also non-medical masks with clear fronts.

Follow the directions on any store-bought non-medical masks regarding how many times it can be reused. Remember to wash and thoroughly dry the non-medical mask after each use. Do not reuse homemade non-medical masks if any breakdown in the fabric, such as a hole or a tear, is noticed.

Should students wear the same mask all day long?

It is important to remember that masks can become contaminated when touched by the wearer's hands and that their usefulness is decreased when the masks become damp or soiled. It is therefore advised that children take off their mask midday, before lunchtime (or as needed), and place the used mask in a clearly labelled container or bag for cleaning at a later time. If it is a disposable mask, it should go directly into the garbage. It is important to follow all guidance related to properly taking off the mask, including cleaning their hands before and after touching the mask. Thereafter, children should take out a clean, unused mask from a clearly labelled container or bag to wear for the remainder of the day.

Parents/guardians/caregivers should wash non-medical masks in the hot cycle of the washing machine, dry them thoroughly, and store them in a clean bag/container. Disposable masks, including medical masks, can be thrown in the garbage once they have been used. Immediate hand washing or use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer before and after mask removal is important.

Schools will have masks available for those who do not have a mask or for those who have forgotten to bring a mask to school.