

Masking and PPE Update for January 2022

Masking and Personal Protective Equipment Update January 2022

With the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, new cases of COVID-19 have risen exponentially in the last three weeks. Community transmission and test positivity rates of COVID-19 are at their highest level compared to any other point in the pandemic. The Omicron variant is more transmissible than Delta or earlier COVID-19 strains and is causing a significant number of mild breakthrough infections among vaccinated patients and staff, who all are capable of transmitting their infection to others.

Masks remain one of the most effective tools in preventing the spread of COVID-19, and consistent and correct mask-wearing is critically important during this Omicron variant surge. Questions have arisen about the best strategies for masking in light of Omicron, and we would like to review best practices around masking once again. One important change to UPHS masking guidance is that effective immediately all patients and visitors in our healthcare settings will be required to wear a surgical/medical face mask, and if they arrive wearing a cloth mask, they will be asked to remove that and don a surgical/medical facemask provided to them. This change has been made because cloth masks have variable efficacy, depending on the material, ply, and design.

Eye protection should be worn by staff for ALL patient contact, including patients who test negative on hospital admission. Since Omicron is highly contagious and has a short incubation period, more patients are converting within a few days of their admission. and are capable of transmitting their COVID-19 infection to staff during the presymptomatic period between admission and conversion.

Key Recommendations for Staff:

- Surgical/medical facemasks should be worn at all times when indoors in all UPHS buildings by both staff and visitors, and patients who are safely able to do so
- Inpatients who are able to do so, should be asked to don their facemask when staff or visitors enter their room
- Visitors must keep their facemask on at all times in the building and in the patient room
- Staff providing direct care to non-COVID patients should continue to wear a surgical/medical facemask and must always wear eye protection
- Staff providing care to COVID-19 confirmed or suspected patients should wear a fit-tested N95 respirator, or a higher level of respiratory protection, (i.e. PAPR) when providing direct care.

Key Recommendations for Visitors and Patients:

- Surgical/medical facemasks should be worn at all times when indoors in all UPHS buildings by all visitors and outpatients.
- Cloth masks are not acceptable, and patients and visitors wearing cloth masks will be given a surgical facemask and asked to remove their cloth mask while in UPHS buildings
- Inpatients who are safely able to do so should don their facemask when staff or visitors enter their room
- Visitors must keep their facemask on at all times in the building and in the patient room

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FAQs

1. How can I be certain my surgical/medical facemask is providing optimal protection for me?

Both ear-loop and tie-back surgical/medical facemasks have a looser fit on some people, resulting in gaps along the side of the face or around the nose. Such gaps may allow respiratory droplets to escape from the wearer and enable respiratory droplets in the air to enter and be inhaled by the wearer. “Knotting and tucking” is an effective strategy to improve fit and decrease these gaps when wearing an ear-loop mask. For video instructions on how to knot and tuck, visit [UNC Health: Pro Tip to Help Your Earloop Mask Fit More Tightly - YouTube](#). Knotting and tucking can be accomplished in 2 easy steps:

- Knot the ear loops of a 3-ply face mask where they join the edge of the mask, then
- Fold and tuck the unneeded material in the corners under the edges of the mask

When donning a surgical/medical facemask, you can assess the fit and check for gaps by cupping your hands around the mask’s outside edges. Make sure no air is flowing from the area near your eyes or the sides of the mask. You can tell your mask is well-fitted when you feel warm air come through the front of the mask, and you see the mask material move in and out with each breath.

Knotting and tucking has been proven in laboratory experiments to provide additional protection compared to standard mask-wearing, decrease the wearer’s exposure to respiratory droplets, and prevent the spread of respiratory droplets from the wearer into the environment.

2. Is it better to double-mask?

Double-masking is not routinely recommended in [healthcare settings](#). In September 2021 the CDC recommended double-masking for the [general public](#), as one way to improve the effectiveness of masks through better fit and source control. The recommendation is to wear a medical facemask with a cloth mask over it. This is not recommended in healthcare settings as a strategy to improve fit, as cloth masks are prohibited, due to their lack of fluid resistance. The University recently recommended double-masking on campus, as the campus is considered a community setting. Some healthcare organizations have recommended wearing a surgical/medical facemask over an N95 respirator when caring for COVID patients as a strategy to allow for extended wear of an N95. This is allowable, particularly during times when N95 respirator supply is limited.

3. Can I wear a KN95 (KN) mask instead of a surgical mask for my daily use?

KN masks may provide more filtration than a surgical mask, however the fit of the KN masks can be variable. Further, the fit and comfort of KN masks often depends on an individual’s facial structure, with some people finding them tight or difficult to wear. An ill-fitting KN will not provide much protection, and may be less effective than a surgical mask. KN masks provided by UPHS may be worn in patient care areas instead of a surgical mask, if staff or visitors prefer this option. However, a KN is NOT considered equivalent to a fit-tested N95 respirator, and should not be worn when providing care to COVID-19 patients or during aerosol-generating procedures.

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4. Can I wear an N95 respirator instead of a surgical mask for my daily use?

It is not necessary to wear an N95 as your universal mask, as a well-fitting surgical/medical mask is sufficient. An N95 respirator should only be worn by individuals who have been fit-tested and understand which N95 is right for them. Wearing an N95 without having been fit tested provides little additional protection to the wearer when compared to a surgical mask. N95 respirators should be reserved for the care of COVID-19 patients, and for use during aerosol-generating procedures. As has been the policy since the beginning of the pandemic, UPHS staff who are fit-tested may choose to upgrade their respiratory protection to an N95, at their discretion.