



FAQs: Best Practices for Masking Compliance

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The following FAQ was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health for use by local facilities and will be posted at sfcdcp.org. Information may change as knowledge, community transmission, availability of PPE, testing, and availability of vaccinations change.

AUDIENCE: Businesses and establishments where Personnel have face-to-face contact with patrons.

BACKGROUND: The spread of COVID-19 continues to pose a substantial threat to the health of the San Francisco public and the use of face coverings is an important tool for reducing risk of transmission.

This FAQ describes practices and strategies that can be applied to gain the compliance of members of the public who may be reluctant to wear a face covering in settings where it is desired or required. It is organized in three sections:

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Background – What you need to know about masks

1) Why wear a mask?

Masks, also referred to as "face coverings" are an effective means of protection against airborne viruses. COVID-19 is mostly spread from person-to-person in the air. Droplets of virus coming from the breath of someone with COVID-19 can linger in the air for a time. A higher number of droplets can get in the air when infected people talk, sing, cough, or sneeze. These droplets are especially dangerous in enclosed spaces with poor ventilation.

You should wear a mask to protect yourself from potential infection, but wearing a mask is an extremely important and effective public health strategy because people with COVID-19 may have no symptoms but can still be breathing out virus-containing droplets that can infect others. This is why even if you don't feel sick you should wear a mask so that you do not unknowingly infect another person who may be vulnerable to severe disease.

2) Do I still have to wear a mask after getting a vaccine?

Yes. It's possible for you to spread the virus even after getting a vaccine. The vaccines that are approved in the U.S. were granted emergency authorizations as soon as it was definitively known that they were safe and would stop the virus from making you sick. We don't yet know if the vaccine will stop you from spreading the virus.

The CDC still advises everyone, even the fully vaccinated to [continue taking precautions](#) like wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet apart from others from outside your household, and avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces in public places. The State of California and the City and County of San Francisco continue to mandate masking in nearly all public settings and circumstances.

3) Are there people who do not have to wear a mask?

Masks should not be worn by children under 2 years of age or people with a disability who cannot wear a mask, or cannot safely wear a mask for reasons related to the disability. Children and people with certain disabilities should wear a mask only if they are able to use a mask correctly, which includes the ability to (1) avoid frequent touching of the mask and their face, (2) limit sucking, drooling, or having excess saliva on the mask, and (3) remove the mask without assistance.

4) Can masks be removed to assist the hearing impaired who need to read lips to communicate?

If you interact with people who rely on reading lips, consider wearing a clear mask or a cloth mask with a clear panel. If you are not able to get a clear mask, you may consider temporarily removing your mask to expose your lips if it seems safe to do so. If not, use written communication or closed captioning. Minimizing background noise may help with speech comprehension for some individuals.

If a mask must be removed to accommodate a patron you must also consider the safety risk this could cause other patrons.

5) Can I breathe in too much carbon dioxide (CO₂) if I wear mask?

Wearing a mask does not raise the carbon dioxide (CO₂) level in the air you breathe. The oxygen (O₂) you breathe in and the CO₂ you breathe out both pass freely through cloth or synthetic face coverings when you exhale or talk. CO₂ and O₂ molecules are much much smaller than the respiratory droplets that carry the virus that causes COVID-19; those respiratory droplets do not pass as easily through a properly designed and properly worn mask.



6) Are goggles or face shields acceptable substitutes for wearing a mask?

Goggles and face shields do not provide sufficient protection and are not acceptable substitutes. They may be used in addition to a mask for added protection. Never place goggles or face shields on a newborn or infant.

7) What is the correct way to mask?

[The CDC explains correct masking as follows:](#)

- A mask should fit snugly and cover both your mouth and nose.
- Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer before putting on your mask.
- Put the mask over your nose and mouth and secure it under your chin.
- Fit the mask snugly against the sides of your face, slipping the loops over your ears or tying the strings behind your head.
- If you have to continually adjust your mask, it doesn't fit properly, and you might need to find a different mask type or brand.
- Make sure you can breathe easily.

8) Is it safe to be indoors with people I don't know?

There is always a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 indoors with people from outside of your household. This is the reason why taking protective measures like masking up, maintaining social distancing, avoiding crowded areas, and hand washing remain important. You will also be safer in a space with open windows bringing in outside air or with a strong ventilation system that replaces indoor air with outside air.

Preparation – How to make a mask-friendly environment

9) How can I reinforce the mask requirement message at my establishment?

The first way to reinforce the masking requirement is to set an example by having all personnel consistently and visibly follow and enforce COVID-19 safety protocols such as physical distancing, hand hygiene and especially by correctly wearing a facial covering.

The second way is to post signage with COVID-19 safety messages, especially messages about the mask requirement and signs that demonstrate the correct way to wear a mask. Signage about the masking requirement should be readily visible at every entrance, restroom, elevator bank, staircase, on every floor, and at entrances to well trafficked areas of your building. Consider posting multi-lingual signage.

The City has created an [Outreach Toolkit](#) with printable signs, including those to encourage masking.

You should also announce safety policies and the masking requirement on your website and in any regular communication you have with your patrons.

10) What should we do if somebody says they don't have a mask?

Try to maintain an ample supply of masks that can be made available to distribute to entering patrons. There should be masks available to give out throughout your establishment, including on each floor and near each entrance or customer service area. Any employee who might address a patron about their mask compliance should have ready access to a supply of masks to hand out.



11) Who should tell patrons to wear a mask inside our facility?

It can often be more effective if the frontline staff who normally interacts the public explains policy to them rather than uniformed security or law enforcement whose presence might lead to an escalation of the situation.

All staff should be trained to understand the masking requirement and learn methods for enforcing it, however it's not critical for all staff to take on this responsibility as long as there is always someone on hand who can be quickly reached and called upon to effectively communicate this requirement. All managers should be prepared to back up and support their frontline staff in delivering this messaging.

12) How can I learn more about masking requirements?

The sf.gov [webpage explains the City's mask mandate](#) including when and where you do and do not have to mask up.

Preventing conflict -- Strategies to address mask refusal

13) How should I tell somebody to put on a mask?

Do not command anyone with an abrupt order like "Hey! Put on your mask!" because this can cause defensiveness and defiance. People do not like being told they are doing something wrong. Additionally, they do not like feeling like they alone are being called out.

The best approach is let them know that they are not being singled out or asked to do anything out of the ordinary. Take a softer approach like, "Excuse me, we ask everybody to wear a mask inside. We really appreciate your cooperation."

Never accost or shout at anybody who is not following the masking rules. This is unlikely to result in a positive outcome and instead create resistance to your message since the person may feel attacked.

Do not threaten anyone who remains defiant. Only resort to consequences like denial of service or suspension from the premises as a last resort. Try to de-escalate the situation (see What is de-escalation and how is it used?).

14) Why do some people resist wearing a mask?

There are many reasons why people resist wearing mask, including political beliefs and assertions of individual rights and liberties. The latter can lead to a state called [psychological reactance](#) where a person feels threatened because they believe their choices or range of alternatives have been limited.

Another factor in mask refusal is a person's perception of risk and their willingness to engage in risky behavior. They might believe the actual risk of exposure is extremely low, or that if they are exposed to the virus, they are strong and healthy and will not be affected.

15) What strategies can be used if patrons exhibit psychological reactance toward the mask mandate?

This is a difficult behavior to address. An appeal to scientific evidence will likely not succeed. A personalized approach may work better. Try to appeal to them as one individual speaking to another Listen to them and treat them as someone who can rationally and willingly make their own decision to accept the reasonable request of another. Do not disagree with their viewpoint. Let them know that their beliefs are not being disregarded or questioned.

Do not focus on what the other individual has done wrong, but instead frame your response in "I" or "we" statements. "I understand you have your reasons, but I have a responsibility to make everyone feel safe and comfortable here. I would appreciate it if you help me out."



Explain that your establishment is requesting the same behavior of all who work and visit there and that you are required by your employer and by the law to address this situation. You should also try to appeal to a sense of cooperation and community solidarity.

16) What strategies can be used with patrons who refuse to wear a mask or deliberately remove it?

It may be possible to engage with them with explanations of the dangers of COVID-19, especially reminding them that young, previously healthy people have died, or have suffered through extended, debilitating symptoms (so-called "long haulers" or [Long COVID](#)).

You may also be able to appeal to them about the importance of working together as a community to fight the virus and keep each other safe. Explain that they may have the virus and not have any symptoms, but they could still be contagious and could do great harm to others, possibly infecting people who they love and care about.

If you have reason to believe it would be persuasive, you could also appeal to the trust that people might have in your institution and your sincere interest keeping everyone safe.

17) How should I respond to an angry reaction to my request to wear a mask?

Be as calm and kind as you can. This anger is rarely directed at you personally. Acknowledge their anger and explain that your primary goal is to assist them. Try to de-escalate the situation.

Do consider your own safety and well-being in your interactions with the public. Allow yourself space and be aware of your surroundings in case the situation escalates. Always call for back-up and support if you think you will need it.

Realize that they have visited your establishment for a purpose and you would like them to be able to take full advantage of whatever activity they came in for. If an individual cannot comply with your lawful, reasonable request, they may not be able to receive the service they expect.

18) What do I do if a patron says that they cannot wear a mask because of a disability?

Remember that businesses are covered by protections such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Such protections prohibit discrimination against patrons with disabilities. If this disability means that a patron cannot wear a mask you should also weigh the health and safety risk this may cause to your employees and other patrons. Consider making reasonable accommodations such as delivery or curbside service, or making your service available outside.

19) What is de-escalation and how is it used?

During the pandemic nearly everyone has felt higher levels of anxiety which may cause some people to involuntarily overreact in uncomfortable or stressful situations. De-escalation provides some behavioral techniques aimed at reducing conflict and promoting fruitful communication.

The [Crisis Prevention Institute](#) has given the following 10 tips for de-escalation.

- **Be Empathetic and Nonjudgmental.** Respect the other's feelings and appreciate that there may be a lot going on in their lives that contributes to their stress and anxiety.
- **Respect Personal Space.** Be aware of your proximity and posture toward the other person. You may be unaware that your closeness or physical bearing is contributing to their anxiety.
- **Use Nonthreatening Nonverbals.** Be mindful and remain neutral with your gestures, facial expressions, movements and tone of voice.
- **Keep Your Emotional Brain in Check.** Remain calm and rational, especially when the other's



behavior may provoke you into a counter-productive emotional reaction.

- **Focus on Feelings.** Sometimes a person's feelings, more than their words, are the message they are sending. Validating their feelings may open the channels to better communication.
- **Ignore Challenging Questions.** Do not allow the other person to direct the conversation away from the issue at hand. Insist on working together on the problem that you are addressing.
- **Set Limits.** Once the person is calm enough to respond, provide them with clear alternatives (If you comply with our rules we're happy to have you stay, if not we'll have to ask you to leave).
- **Choose Wisely What You Insist Upon.** Be clear to yourself what is negotiable and what is nonnegotiable. Sometimes a little flexibility can bring about the desired outcome.
- **Allow Silence for Reflection.** Taking a moment to allow both parties think things over can promote thoughtfulness and may encourage a change in behavior.
- **Allow Time for Decisions.** It is much harder for someone to think clearly when they are upset. If you don't rush the other person, they may calm to the point of making the right decisions.

20) Are there other strategies that are effective?

Always check in with your co-workers. Compare notes with them on what has worked or not worked. If you come up with a verbal strategy that works well for you, turn it into a script that you rehearse in your mind. But remember that there are no magic words that work in every situation. Remain flexible and meet every situation calmly and with knowledge.

21) What can I do when all my efforts to persuade a noncompliant individual to mask have failed?

If your establishment has onsite security, you should call them for assistance. One of the most powerful tools you may have is a denial of service. Do not allow the non-compliant person to purchase your products or access the service they want.

As a last resort you can contact law enforcement non-emergency at (415) 553-0123. Keep in mind that a law enforcement response may not be prioritized for these types of calls, but you should not hesitate to call in the event of extreme situations such as trespassing, vandalism, or actual or threatened violence.

Resources

- San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFPDH)
 - [SFPDH COVID-19 Guidance](#)
 - [Outreach Toolkit for Coronavirus COVID-19](#)
 - [Masks and Face Coverings for The Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
 - [Update on Masking: When and How to Use Higher Quality Masks](#)
 - [Personal Protective Equipment](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
 - [When You're Fully Vaccinated](#)
 - [How to Protect Yourself and Others](#)
 - [How to Wear Masks](#)
 - [Post-COVID Conditions](#)
- [Crisis Prevention Institute \(CPI\) Top 10 De-Escalation Tips](#)