Tip Sheet: Safety Information Regarding Voluntary Use of N95 Respirators

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This Tip sheet was developed by the San Francisco Department of Public Health and is posted at http://www.sfcdcp.org/ppe. It will be updated as needed.

AUDIENCE: For non-healthcare individuals who have chosen voluntarily to wear N95 respirators for enhanced protection from COVID-19, especially those belonging in higher risk groups (found in “Update on Masking: When and How to Use Higher Quality Masks”). This tip sheet does NOT apply to individuals, employers, or employees who are mandated to use N95 respirators by either CalOSHA regulations or local Health Officer Orders.

PURPOSE: Provide tips on how to find and safely use N95 respirators for protection from COVID-19.

BACKGROUND: “N95 Respirator” (sometimes called N95 mask or N95) refers to a type of face mask that has been tested and certified by the CDC’s National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Because of its higher quality and design, when fitted to the individual wearer, it offers substantial protection from COVID-19 when compared to other types of face coverings. Individuals who may benefit from this additional protection include those who are unvaccinated for COVID-19 AND meet the following criteria:

- Are at higher risk of severe illness if they get COVID-19 due to age or underlying medical conditions (see www.sfcdcp.org/vulnerable)
- Must be in higher-risk situations where they can’t practice ideal safety precautions such as being indoors and can’t maintain 6 feet distance or they must be indoors around people who are unmasked. Examples include:
  - Being indoors around unmasked individuals (e.g., dining, personal services where masks are removed, public transit, etc.)
  - Entering indoor settings where people have been unmasked (e.g., dining, hotel room service, janitors, personal services, etc.)
  - Being indoors with exposure to high volume of masked people throughout the day (high volume grocery store workers, high volume retail workers, transit operators)
  - Being outdoors around unmasked individuals and unable to maintain at least 6 feet apart (e.g., outdoor dining, personal services where masks are removed, etc.)
- Must be in a higher risk situation such as being indoors with someone who has COVID-19 or was a close contact of someone with COVID-19

For additional safety information, please see What can I do to protect myself if I am at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 or at higher risk of getting exposed to COVID-19?
Important Safety Information Regarding N95 Respirators

GENERAL SAFETY:

• N95 respirators may not be helpful for all people and may be dangerous for some people with lung or heart conditions. Before wearing an N95 respirator, please consult with your personal health care provider regarding any health conditions.

• It takes more effort to breathe through a respirator. Monitor yourself and take breaks, particularly if you’re working in the heat or doing heavy work.

• N95 respirators only filter out particulates. They do not protect you against gases and vapors, including cleaning solvents, vehicle exhaust, or gasoline. Do not use an N95 respirator to enter a closed space such as a tank, underground vault, or manhole.

SELECTION PROCESS:

If planning to use an N95 respirator, only use those tested and certified by NIOSH. A full list of tested and certified N95 respirators can be found here.

• Look for specific markings (more info found here) to make sure the N95 is actually NIOSH-certified.

PROPER USE:

• Follow all instructions provided by the manufacturer on use and maintenance of the respirator.

• Wash your hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer containing at least 60% alcohol before putting on or taking off your respirator. Avoid touching your respirator, especially the outside portion, while using it.

• To maximize protection from an N95 respirator, the edges of the respirator must be in complete contact with the wearer’s face to get a good seal.
Employers required by Cal/OSHA or Health Order to provide N95 respirators for mandatory use should be providing **fit-testing**, which is a process that helps identify the exact brand, model, and size of N95 respirator that will ensure a good seal during normal use conditions. Employers that are not required to provide N95 respirators may still offer fit-testing. If individuals fail fit testing for a specific brand, model, and size of N95 respirators, employers can attempt to fit these employees with alternate brands and models of N95 respirators. It is not uncommon for employers to need 2-3 brands and models of N95 respirators and 2-3 sizes of N95 respirators to successfully fit 95% of their workforce if that is the goal.

- If you are unable to access fit-testing, see Step 4 of the attached visual flier on how to use an N95 respirator and perform a **seal-check**. It will help an unfitted user see if the respirator is forming a good seal against their face.
- Facial hair, including stubble or beard, that interfere with the seal will cause the respirator to leak and reduce protection. Please shave if facial hair crosses the sealing surface of the respirator. (Facial hairstyle for N95)

- Do not wear the respirator’s straps over a hat, hood, cap, or hair cover. Straps should be against your head.

**STORAGE AND DISPOSAL:**

- Discard your respirator:
  - When it becomes difficult to breathe through it,
  - When the inside shows any indications (smudging, spotting, discoloration) of contamination,
  - When the outside becomes dirty, or
  - When the facepiece is torn, distorted or a strap is broken.

- If you are reusing your respirator, make sure to store it in a clean location where it will not be crushed or damaged. Paper rather than plastic bags are preferred for storage because it allows the respirator to dry. Keep track of your respirator so that you do not mistakenly use someone else’s respirator (e.g. label bag with your name).

**MORE INFORMATION:**

- Do not use respirators with valves as these allow droplets to be released from the respirator which puts those around you at risk. Respirators with valves are not allowed by Health Order No. C19-12.
- Employers who provide respirators or permit employees to use respirators should follow California Code of Regulations (CCR) Title 8 Section 5144 (c)(2) and Appendix D requirements for voluntary use of respirators.

**Additional Resources**

More information on Personal Protective Equipment: [www.sfcdcp.org/ppe](http://www.sfcdcp.org/ppe)
Department of Public Health COVID-19 guidance: [www.sfcdcp.org/covid19](http://www.sfcdcp.org/covid19)
CDC: [https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html)
[https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/pdfs/FacialHairWmask11282017-508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/pdfs/FacialHairWmask11282017-508.pdf)
Voluntary N95 Respirator Use

**Target Audience:** non-healthcare employees who are voluntarily using N95 respirators for additional protection from COVID-19 when working in higher risk settings. Following these simple steps will help you properly put on and take off your N95 respirator, and keep you and everyone else safe.

1. **Wash Your Hands**
   - Wash your hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rubs containing at least 60% alcohol.

2. **Inspect the Respirator**
   - Inspect the respirator for damage. If it appears damaged or damp, do not use it.

3. **Put on the Respirator**
   - Cup the respirator in your hand with the nosepiece at your fingertips and the straps hanging below your hand.
   - Cover your mouth and nose with the respirator and make sure there are no gaps (e.g., facial hair, hair, and glasses) between your face and the respirator.
   - Place the strap over your head and rest at the top back of your head. If you have a second strap, place the bottom strap around your neck and below your ears. Do not overlap straps.
   - If your respirator has a metal nose clip, use your fingertips from both hands to mold the nose area to the shape of your nose.

4. **Adjust the Respirator**
   - Place both hands over the respirator. Inhale quickly and then exhale. If you feel leakage from the nose, readjust the nosepiece; if leakage from the respirator edges, readjust the straps. Repeat until you get a proper seal. If you can't get a proper seal, try another respirator.

5. **Wear the Respirator**
   - Avoid touching the respirator while using it. If you do, wash your hands.

6. **Remove the Respirator**
   - Wash your hands.
   - Remove the respirator from behind. Do not touch the front.

7. **Dispose of the Respirator**
   - If the respirator does not need to be reused because of supply shortages, discard it in a closed-bin waste receptacle. Wash your hands.

Note: Images shown represent one type of N95 respirator. Yours may look different - the NIOSH N95 Database has all the specific instructions for each type.

1) Find the respirator certification number (TC-84A.####) on respirator face-piece or strap.
2) Look up the respirator manufacturer on the NIOSH N95 database [https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html](https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/default.html)
3) A link to the respirator’s instructions will be in the right-hand column.

Adapted by SFDPH from OSHA doc# 4015-05 2020