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CANADA

Everything you need to know about face masks

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Face masks: A seemingly simple piece of fabric that straps around your ears and over your nose (note: always above your nostrils, and never under!) is now as essential to your leaving-the-house checklist as keys, wallet and phone — if not more important since it helps limit the spread of [COVID-19](#).

For anyone still getting the hang of this new pandemic wear, or caught wondering if they even *need* to wear a face mask (the short answer: yes, most likely, but more on that later), we've rounded up the answers to your questions.

Why wear a mask?

The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends you wear a non-medical mask when in public to protect the people around you from COVID-19 transmission.

COVID-19 is spread by tiny “droplets” that people expel when they breathe, cough, or sneeze. A mask helps prevent those droplets from being expelled into the air.

This may be particularly important as we begin to understand the potential impact of “silent spreaders”: people infected by the virus who are asymptomatic or presymptomatic, who may not know that they’re infected.

- [Should we wear masks to slow COVID-19? Canada’s top public health doctor now says non-medical masks could prevent some spread](#)
- [‘Heads should roll’: Nurses livid over COVID-19 mask debate](#)
- [Opinion | Your COVID-19 mask hides your face but reveals your good sense and compassion](#)

What kind of mask should I use?

If you’re a health-care worker or front-line worker, you are likely wearing personal protective equipment, which may include medical-grade masks. It’s also “extremely important that we keep the supply of medical masks where it is needed,” Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, said in April. “Health-care workers need medical masks.”

For people who aren’t front-line workers, Public Health Canada has recommended Neoprene masks, surgical masks, homemade cloth masks, face shields or even scarves or bandanas.

Of course, masks are not 100 per cent effective in preventing exposure to the novel coronavirus. People should continue prioritizing physical distancing — staying six feet, or two metres, apart — and handwashing, while avoiding touching their eyes, nose and mouth.

- [The great mask debate: Which of these COVID-19 face coverings is right for you?](#)
- [These masks have sparked a rallying cry. Is Canada ‘failing to protect health-care workers’?](#)
- [Masks during coronavirus make life difficult for those with hearing loss. But the answer is clear](#)

When should I wear a mask?

A mask can help in situations where physical distancing may be more difficult, like shopping at the grocery store or taking the bus.

You don’t have to wear a mask when driving alone in a car or when you are outside for a walk, where you can practise physical distancing.

Urging or ordering Torontonians to wear face masks in some public settings is also still under consideration during Toronto’s COVID-19 recovery planning, Mayor John Tory [said in March](#).

As Canada’s economy slowly begins to reopen, some businesses and restaurants may also begin asking customers to wear masks or face coverings if they plan to enter the store. For instance, customers shopping at Longo’s grocery stores have been required to cover their faces as of May 4.

- [How to get your kids to wear a mask](#)
- [Face masks are part of Toronto’s COVID-19 recovery planning, mayor says](#)

Can I wash and reuse my masks?

It depends on what type of mask you’re using. If you’re using a mask made of fabric or neoprene, then you can reuse these masks so long as you’re washing them after each use.

Surgical masks are one-time use.

Public Health Canada recommends changing your mask, whether it’s cloth or medical, when it gets damp, soiled or crumpled.

- [Mask hygiene: Experts say cloth masks need to be sanitized after each use](#)
- [Opinion | Wearing cloth face masks is a way to help in the pandemic fight](#)

How do I safely remove my mask and clean it?

Before removing your mask, Public Health Canada recommends that you wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and soap; if soap and water aren’t available to you, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

Remove the mask from the back, without touching the front or your face.

If your mask is disposable, place it in a lined garbage bin immediately — don’t discard it on the ground — then wash your hands again for 20 seconds. Don’t touch your face in-between steps.

If you’re cleaning a mask that’s reusable, then Public Health Canada recommends laundering your mask in hot water immediately after removal, then washing your hands again for 20 seconds.

If you’re on the go, or aren’t able to wash the mask right away, place it in a sealed plastic bag until you’re ready to clean it. Be sure to empty the mask into the washing machine by holding onto the plastic bag, and not reaching in to grab it.

- [Used masks, gloves are being tossed as litter. Garbage crews aren’t the only ones who are worried](#)
- [Washing your hands can prevent the spread of coronavirus — but you’re probably doing it wrong](#)

Why did guidelines around wearing masks change?

On Friday, April 3, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control advised the public to use “cloth face coverings” to help slow the spread of COVID-19. By Monday, April 6, the Public Health Agency of Canada followed suit.

Dr. Theresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, said that day in a news conference that wearing a “non-medical mask, even if you have no symptoms, is an additional measure that you can take to protect others around you.”

Initially, officials in Canada were concerned about preserving personal protective equipment, such as medical-grade masks like the tight-fitting N95 respirators, for health-care workers on the front lines of the pandemic.

The advice shifted when Dr. Tam said during the April 6 news conference that the special advisory committee to the Public Health Agency of Canada had changed its recommendation, based on changing scientific findings in the previous 10 days.

The new recommendation was that homemade and cloth masks could help prevent an infected individual who shows no symptoms from spreading it to others, but that these masks would not prevent a mask-wearer from getting sick.

- [The COVID-19 advice around masks has changed. Here's a simplified version of Canada's new recommendation](#)
- [About-face about cloth-mask leaves backers vindicated](#)
- [Non-medical face masks can help prevent spread of COVID-19, Canada's top doctor says](#)

Where can I buy flattering masks? And can I make my own?

You sure can. There are resources online for how to easily make your own homemade mask, and boundless resources for where to find masks that suit your personality and lifestyle.

Here are just a few of those resources we've rounded up to make that search a bit easier:

- [The artisans behind the protective masks](#)
- [Should face masks be beautiful?](#)
- [Massive mask-making networks mobilize across Canada](#)
- [NHL helps fans stay safe with face masks in their favourite team's colours](#)
- [Canadian designers go bold with fashionable face masks in COVID-19 era](#)

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