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**GTA**

# How do I know when it's time to buy a new mask? A public health doctor answers

By **Jenna Moon** Staff Reporter

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*Editor's note: The Star is taking a broad look at what entering the second phase of reopening after COVID-19 lockdowns will mean for Ontario. Every day, we'll try to answer a different question about post-lockdown life. You can read a recap of all of the questions we've answered here.*

Heading into stage two of reopening means that more people are heading back to work or leaving their homes for errands more often.

If you're new at buying masks, figuring out what works best for you might seem difficult.

Households consisting of more than one person should consider having masks for each separate family member to avoid the possibility of cross-contamination.

"The recommendation is really try to have your own masks just to avoid the chance of accidentally picking up someone else's in case it's not clean," said Monika Dutt, a public health physician based out of Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Colour coded masks that relate to each member of the household might be a clear way to differentiate between which mask belongs to each person, she said.

The number of masks a person owns is going to be largely dependent on their lifestyle and how often one might be using a mask, Dutt explained.

"If you only go out once a week for grocery shopping ...versus somebody who's going out often, I think you need to kind of look at what your days are like and how often you're going to be using them and washing them if needed, and then decide (the number of masks that) works best for you," she said.

If you're just starting your hunt for a non-medical face mask, Dutt recommends looking for something made of at least two layers of tightly woven cloth — something that is also outlined by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Most commonly, this can be either cotton or linen, according to the PHAC guidelines.

While throwing fabric masks in with a load of laundry is a great way to keep them clean, it might not always line up with washing schedules. In these cases, Dutt said, hand-washing the masks in hot, soapy water will disinfect them between uses.

Your mask should still hold its shape after washing. If you start finding holes or tears, it's time to retire the mask, Dutt said.

"If (the mask) looks like it's getting really stretched, that might be a time to change it. But in general, just kind of make sure that there's no tears, no holes, and you have those two pieces of cloth ... layers. And that should be sufficient."

Dutt suggests taking a mask with you every time you leave the house, even if you're not planning on going into closed or busy spaces.

"It's just good to have them with you. So even if you're not wearing it because you're in an open space and it's not something that's needed at that time, it can happen that you end up in a place where people close by and you might want to have (the mask)," she said, noting that this also means you're prepared to enter stores or restaurants that require masks.

"I think it's the kind of thing now that's just good to always have with you."



**Jenna Moon** is a breaking news reporter for the Star and is based in Toronto. Follow her on Twitter: [@\\_jennamoon](https://twitter.com/_jennamoon)

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