

Frequently Asked Questions about the Health Officer Directive on facial coverings

What is a cloth face covering?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define cloth face coverings as fabric coverings including cloth face masks, scarves and bandana coverings, or any homemade face covering made of cotton fabric.

The CDC also makes clear that cloth face coverings should:

- Fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
- Be secured with ties or ear loops
- Include multiple layers of fabric
- Allow for breathing without restriction
- Be able to be laundered and machine dried without damage or change to shape

You can find more information [on the CDC's website](#).

Am I required to wear a face covering?

In King County, you are directed to wear face coverings over your nose and mouth while you're in an indoor public setting where you'll likely come into contact with another person. You are also directed to wear a cloth face covering while you're in an outdoor public setting – like a farmers market or a crowded park -- where it is difficult to maintain six feet of physical distance at all times. The Health Officer's Directive relies on individual compliance; there is no penalty for not wearing a mask.

Operators and riders on King County Metro will be required to wear face coverings. Metro operators will not prevent passengers without face coverings from boarding, but recorded reminders will play on the vehicle's public address system informing riders of the face covering policy. Security officers will communicate public health guidance to riders who are not wearing a face covering or staying apart from other passengers.

When do I need to wear a face covering?

You are directed to wear a cloth face covering over your nose and mouth in an indoor public setting and at outdoor public spaces where it is difficult to maintain six feet of physical distance at all times. This means you don't need to wear a face covering when you're outside walking, but you would be directed to wear one while at a farmers market or visiting a crowded park where social distancing is not possible to maintain. You are directed to wear

a cloth face covering for the entire duration of the time you're in either of those settings.

Why do I need to wear a face covering?

King County has made progress to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our communities, but most people do not have immunity to the disease and remain susceptible. As a community, we remain vulnerable to a surge of new cases that could make many more people ill and overwhelm our health care system's ability to treat those with the most serious complications of the disease.

The [CDC recommends](#) that in communities like King County, where there is significant community-based transmission, all individuals cover their noses and mouths with a cloth face covering to prevent inadvertently spreading the COVID-19 virus while interacting with others outside their homes when they are unable to maintain six feet of distance.

Do face coverings help prevent the spread of COVID-19?

While facial coverings do not replace proper hygiene or social distancing, a cloth face covering may help to protect others and slow community spread of COVID-19 by blocking infectious droplets from spreading when someone with the infection coughs, sneezes or speaks.

We know that one key transmission method for the COVID-19 virus is through respiratory droplets, and growing evidence suggests that a significant number of infections are transmitted by asymptomatic people who are expelling those infectious droplets.

Why do I need to wear a face covering now, rather than earlier when cases were rising at a faster rate?

The primary strategies to prevent COVID-19 transmission have been and continue to be avoiding people who are ill, physical distancing, good hand washing, and avoiding nonessential contact with others. These strategies have worked together to decrease the intensity and peak of our outbreak and the number of COVID-19 illnesses.

Mask use was recommended for people with symptoms, but cloth mask use for well people in public was not initially recommended. This was because even though it has potential benefit, the available evidence is inconclusive about the degree to which homemade fabric masks may suppress spread of infection from the wearer to others. Also, there was concern that people who

use masks might not continue to take other more important steps to prevent transmission, like distancing.

Since our outbreak was identified in February and early March, the importance of COVID-19 transmission from people who do not have symptoms has been increasingly recognized. On April 1, 2020 Public Health – Seattle & King County, in accordance with a new CDC recommendation, issued updated guidance which underscored that face coverings can help prevent the spread of the virus. Around that time, healthcare facilities began requiring that all visitors wear a face covering.

On May 4, 2020 Governor Inslee modified his “Stay Home, Stay Healthy” order to reduce restrictions on some public activities that are likely to bring more Washingtonians into close contact with each other. As the state gradually begins to reopen, residents are more likely to come into contact with each other providing opportunities for COVID-19 spread. In addition, because the number of COVID-19 cases has stopped decreasing recently, King County has determined that cloth face coverings should be re-emphasized as part of our strategy to decrease the risk of a resurgence in cases in this unprecedented situation.

Is anyone exempt from wearing a face covering?

Yes. Face coverings should not be worn by children who are two years of age or younger, or children under the age of twelve unless supervised by an adult. Additionally, if wearing a face covering would be difficult or harmful, an individual should not do so. Examples would be someone who has a physical disability that makes it difficult to easily wear or remove a face covering; someone who is deaf and uses facial and mouth movements as part of communications; someone who has been advised by a medical professional to not wear one; or someone who has trouble breathing or cannot remove a face covering without assistance.

When is a face covering not needed?

Face coverings are not directed to be worn when:

- At home
- In your car alone or if you’re only with members of your household
- Exercising outdoors, like walking, hiking, bicycling, or running, when appropriate social distancing is possible

It’s recommended to have a face covering with you and ready to use when in public for times when maintaining physical distancing is not possible.

Can I use an N95 respirator or surgical mask instead?

Members of the general public should not purchase medical grade or surgical masks at this time, as there is a serious shortage of face masks for health care workers. Medical masks should be reserved for health care providers who are on the front lines working to protect us all. Please avoid shopping for surgical, N95 respirator, or other medical masks.

If you have an N95 respirator or other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that you would like to donate:

- **In Seattle**, [please complete this survey](#) and email PPEdonations@seattle.gov with any questions.
- **In King County**, visit the [King County Regional Donations Connector](#) website.

How do I care for my fabric face covering?

Worn face coverings may be contaminated with infectious agents. You should wash your face covering after each use in a washing machine. If you don't have access to a washing machine, you can clean your cloth face covering by vigorously lathering it in soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds.

Before and after you put on your cloth face covering, you should clean your hands either with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer or with soap and water.

Is my employer required to provide me with a face covering if I need to wear one at work?

The Governor's [Safe Start Plan](#) requires that employers provide the protective gear that is required for their employees to do business.

Can a business owner require masks upon entry?

Yes. Businesses are generally allowed to exceed governmental regulations in how they are operate, provided that they do so in a way that does not discriminate.

What is the penalty for not wearing a face covering?

There is no penalty for not wearing a face covering. Violation of this Directive does not create grounds to stop, detain, issue a citation, arrest, or prosecute individuals who do not comply with it. Law enforcement will not be involved in the enforcement of this directive. This Directive may and should be used to educate, encourage, and persuade individuals to wear face coverings, and we will evaluate if additional steps need to be taken if there is wide-scale non-compliance.

It's up to all of us to help follow public health guidance to slow the spread of COVID-19 in our community. We need to be accountable to each other, to our most vulnerable community members, and to our first responders and health care workers who are on the frontlines of this crisis.

Do I need to wear a face covering on buses?

Yes, King County now requires individuals to wear face coverings while riding King County Metro buses. Metro operators will not prevent passengers without face coverings from boarding, but recorded reminders will play on the vehicle's public address system informing riders of the face covering policy. Security officers will communicate public health guidance to riders who are not wearing a face covering or staying apart from other passengers.

Do I need to wear a face covering while on walks, or at parks?

It depends. You are directed to wear a cloth face covering at outdoor public spaces where you're unable to maintain six feet of distance from other people. This means you don't need to wear a face covering when you're outside in your neighborhood walking if you are able to keep six feet of distance from others, but you should wear one while at a farmers market or outdoor takeout location.

If you believe that you could come within six feet of another individual while on a walk, at a park, or in another outdoor setting, wearing a face covering is strongly urged under this Directive.

Do I need to wear a face covering in a rideshare or taxi?

Yes. Rideshares and taxis are considered indoor public settings for the purposes of this directive.

What do I do if I see someone not wearing a face covering, even though they should be?

Nothing. Enforcement is not expected or appropriate for law enforcement or members of the public. Some individuals have conditions or circumstances that would make wearing a mask difficult or dangerous. Under this Directive, people are making decisions about wearing face coverings that are appropriate for them.

How long do I need to wear a face covering?

You are directed to wear a cloth face covering for the entire duration of the time you're in a public indoor setting or outdoor public gathering space and unable to maintain six feet of distance from other people.

Who qualifies for free face coverings provided by the City of Seattle and King County?

The City of Seattle is working with community-based organizations to distribute 45,000 cloth face coverings to vulnerable communities, including people experiencing homelessness, older adults, and staff at food banks. The City's community partners are identifying eligible people based off their existing client lists.

King County is distributing 115,000 face coverings and masks through community-based organizations. Of that total, the Executive's Office is overseeing the distribution of 40,000 non-medical cloth face coverings. Each of the nine King County Council offices will receive 1,000 face coverings from this allotment to distribute, and the remaining amount will be available to the public through community organizations.

In addition, King County Metro has received generous in-kind donations of surgical masks from individuals, businesses, and organizations, which helps provide masks to frontline employees plus 75,000 to members of our community in greatest need. King County offers its appreciation and thanks for mask donations from ATU Local 587, the Chinese American Civic Association, GTR Technologies, Heather Johnson Stallard, and the Little Masters Club.

How can I access free face coverings provided by the City of Seattle and King County?

You currently cannot apply for a free face covering from the City of Seattle or King County – they are being distributed by our community-based partners. However, cloth face coverings can easily be made at home with any piece of cotton fabric! [The CDC has step-by-step instructions on how to make a cloth face covering.](#)

Are there other ways to access free face coverings?

If you are part of an organization that needs free cloth face coverings, contact the [Seattle Mask Brigade](#).

I want to help donate or make face coverings – how do I do that?

United Way of King County is collecting volunteers and donations for cloth face coverings. [Learn more about how to help.](#)