

COVID-19 FAQs re mask requirements – general public

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Beginning Monday, August 17, 2020 at 12:01 AM, it is mandatory that people in the general public wear a mask or other form of face covering in indoor public spaces.

This page answers many of the common questions that people have about this new requirement. The content will be updated as we receive more questions and information. Please continue to refer to the website for up to date and accurate information.

What actions should you take now?

- Get a mask/face covering if you don't already have one. Make one if you are able. Find out more [here](#).
- Review how to use and care for them properly. You can find information on our Masks or Face Covering page
- Make sure they fit properly. Masks or face coverings should cover your mouth, nose and chin. You may need to make adjustments so that they are worn effectively and don't cause problems like slipping down, having gaps, and/or fogging glasses.
- If you think you may have difficulty wearing a mask/face covering, we encourage you to try them out for a short period of time, or try other types of face coverings that may work better for you.

A properly constructed and fitted mask is the recommended option. Other face coverings that cover the nose, mouth and chin such as a bandana or scarf are reasonable alternatives.

Keep in mind that wearing a mask or face covering provides an additional layer of protection against COVID-19. A mask is not a replacement for other public health measures, it is important to continue all the other actions such as physical distancing, hand hygiene and staying home if you have any symptoms.

Why are we doing this now?

As businesses, organizations, schools and day care centres re-open in our region, there is a higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 because more people are interacting in the communities.

A mask/face covering that securely covers an individual's mouth, nose and chin can act as a barrier that reduces the chances of respiratory droplets spreading the virus to other people. The mask/face covering also reduces the chances of contaminating nearby surfaces which can also lead to transmission of the virus.

As we prepare for a possible increase in the spread of the virus, using a mask/face covering is one more measure to protect ourselves, our families and our communities from COVID-19. To achieve this benefit, we need to implement this measure before the virus is circulating in greater numbers.

What is an enclosed public space? Where do I need to wear a mask?

Enclosed Public Space means indoor public spaces of businesses and organizations, accessed by the public. These include but are not limited to:

- restaurants, cafés, cafeterias, banquet halls;
- retail establishments and shopping malls;
- churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, or other places of worship;
- libraries, museums, art galleries, recreational facilities, bingo halls, community centers and halls, cinemas, theatres, concert venues, special event venues, convention centers, or other similar entertainment, cultural, or leisure facilities;
- sports facilities, sports clubs, gyms, yoga studios, dance studios, and stadiums;
- real estate open houses
- common areas of hotels, motels, or short-term rental premises such as lobbies, elevators, meeting rooms, restrooms, laundry rooms, gyms, and kitchens;

- public transportation, bus shelters, and private transportation for hire, including taxis, limousines and rideshare services
- spas, hair salons, barbers, nail salons, and other personal service settings that are subject to health and safety protocols provided by the Province of Ontario during the provincial emergency;

Schools, child care centres, day camps, health care facilities and other indoor spaces that are not accessible to the public such as residential buildings or condominiums are not considered an enclosed public space. Note that many of these spaces have other government guidelines or requirements related to COVID-19 that apply to them.

How do masks and face coverings work?

Wearing a mask helps to trap germs if you are ill and protects people who are around you.

Some people may have COVID-19 and not know it or show any symptoms of it. When you wear a mask, it helps protect others and when other people wear a mask they are helping to protect you.

Wearing a mask alone will not prevent the spread of COVID-19. You should continue to practice other preventative measures including frequent hand washing and physical distancing.

What is considered a mask or face covering?

A “mask” includes any cloth, medical or disposable mask that filters respiratory droplets and fully covers the nose, mouth and chin without any gaps.

A “face covering” is a bandana, scarf or even clothing that loosely covers your nose, mouth and chin. Face coverings may provide some protection from COVID-19, but a fitted mask is recommended as the best option.

Can I wear a face shield instead of a mask or face covering?

No. Face shields do not replace masks or face coverings. Face shields are meant to protect the eyes but do not work to contain the wearer’s respiratory droplets since the nose and mouth are not properly covered. If face shields are used, they must be worn with a mask.

How do I wear a mask or face covering the right way?

1. Wash or sanitize your hands before putting on the mask.
2. Place the mask over your mouth, nose, and chin, making sure there are no gaps.
3. Do not touch your mask while wearing it. Do not leave the mask on your neck, forehead, or hanging from your ear.
4. Change your mask as soon as it gets damp or dirty.
5. Remove the mask without touching the outside of it. Wash mask in hot soapy water, either by hand or in a washing machine.
6. Wash or sanitize your hands and clean any surfaces that the dirty mask touches.

Should children wear masks?

Public health recommends that [children under two years of age should not wear masks.](#)

Children under the age of five years either chronologically or developmentally who are unable or refuse to wear a mask or face covering and cannot be persuaded to do so by their caregiver are exempt from wearing masks in enclosed public places.

When should I take off my mask or face covering?

You should take off your mask when:

- You are no longer in an enclosed public space.
- If your mask becomes damp or dirty and you can exchange it for a new one if you are still in a situation where you need to wear a mask.
- If you are having difficulty in breathing or you are not able to tolerate for health reasons.

What if I can't afford a mask?

Not everyone can pick up or afford to buy a mask so we encourage you to wear a face covering. You can use a bandana, a scarf or clothing – just make sure your nose, mouth and chin are fully covered.

What materials should I use if I make my own face covering?

Use two or three layers of tightly woven fabric that is breathable. Cotton with a higher thread count is a great option. You can use fabrics you already have on hand like extra pillow cases or t-shirts. The fabric should be suitable to withstand multiple washing cycles using hot water. You can learn how to make a sew or no sew mask [here](#).

Do businesses and organizations need to supply face coverings to the public?

No. Businesses and organizations are not required to supply masks for the public. Individuals are encouraged to bring their own mask or face coverings. Establishments may choose to provide masks to the public for free or at a cost, but it is not a requirement.

Do I still need to stay at least 2 metres (6 feet) away from people if wearing a mask or face covering?

Yes, wearing a mask or face covering does not replace physical distancing. Physical distancing is still an important practice for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Wearing a mask provides an extra layer of protection to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 as businesses, organizations, schools and day care centres reopen and we interact with more people in the community.

Who is exempt from wearing a mask?

In accordance with the [Instruction Letter to Employers, Business Owners and Operators](#) provided by Dr. Young-Hoon, the Medical Officer of Health, the following exemptions are allowed:

- children under two years of age, or children under the age of five years either chronologically or developmentally who refuse to wear a mask and cannot be persuaded to do so by their caregiver;
- Persons who cannot safely wear a mask or face covering because of medical conditions such as breathing difficulties, cognitive difficulties, hearing or communication difficulties;
- Persons who cannot wear or are unable to apply or remove a mask without assistance, including those who are accommodated under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* or who have protections under the *Ontario Human Rights Code, R.S.O. 1990, c.H.19*, as amended;
- A person who is employed by or is an agent of the Operator of an Enclosed Public Space and is within or behind a physical barrier such as plexiglass.

Those exempt from the policy are not required to show proof of exemption.

Note that all clients must wear a mask or face covering at all times while receiving services at personal service settings. The only exception is when clients are receiving services on an area of their face that would otherwise be covered by a face covering or they are meet the exemptions for wearing a mask.

Do I need a doctor's note for an exemption?

No. Wearing a mask or face covering is a requirement that is part of an "honour system". Northwestern Health Unit will continue to communicate to businesses, organizations and the public about who is exempted from wearing a mask or face covering.

Are there any times when I don't need to wear a mask indoors?

There are a few times when wearing a mask indoors is not required. These situations include the following:

1. While actively engaging in an athletic or fitness activity including water-based activities;
2. Consuming food or drink;
3. Receiving services to areas of the face that would otherwise be covered by a face covering, when and where this is permitted under the regulations; or,
4. For any emergency or medical purpose.

How long will mandatory masking policies be in effect?

The current instructions are made by the Medical Officer of Health under the *Reopening Ontario Act* (Government of Ontario) and specifically, Regulation 364/20 (Government of Ontario). The Medical Officer of Health continues to assess the need for public health measures and would reassess actions as legislation and local and provincial COVID-19 circumstance evolve.

At this time we expect that the requirement will last at least into 2021 because of 2020/21 flu season and the possibility of a COVID-19 second wave.

Are masks mandatory everywhere in Ontario and in other provinces?

There is currently no province-wide mandatory mask order, however many areas have implemented one. If you are travelling within Ontario and want to know if masking is mandatory, visit their local public health unit's website.

Masks may be mandatory in other provinces. Please check the appropriate provincial and local public health websites for destination-specific information.

How will mandatory masking be enforced?

Mandatory masking in enclosed public spaces and public transportation will be enacted and enforced in "good faith" primarily to educate people on wearing masks or face coverings and promote their use in enclosed public spaces.

Businesses and organizations must ask everyone to wear a mask if they enter the space without one, or if they remove their mask for an extended period of time while in the business or organization.

Those exempt from the policy are not required to show proof of exemption.

How is Northwestern Health Unit enforcing this?

Every business and organization falling under this directive is required to adopt a Mandatory Mask Policy.

Northwestern Health Unit and other partners will enforce the requirement that businesses and organizations have a mask policy and implement their policy. NWHU does not enforce the requirement that individuals wear a mask in an enclosed public space.

What can I do if I see a person without a mask?

First, remember that there are reasons that some people cannot wear a mask. The person might have a medical condition or disability that you cannot see, or may not to wear a mask for religious or cultural reasons.

The best way to avoid spreading or getting COVID-19 is to:

- Stay 2 metres (6 feet) from others who are not in your social circle, and wear a mask when it is not possible
- Wash your hands often
- Cover your coughs and sneezes
- Stay home when sick
- Don't touch your face

What can I do if a business does not have a policy? Or won't enforce it?

Northwestern Health Unit and other partners will follow-up with businesses and organizations that do not have or follow their mask policy according to our capacity.

You can report businesses and organizations who do not have or follow their policy by sending us an email at talkpublichealth@nwhu.on.ca or by calling our COVID-19 Hotline at 1-866-468-2240. We will need to know your name and contact information, the name and location of the business, and the date that you were there and saw that they did not have a policy or did not enforce their policy.

How can I encourage my child to wear a mask?

Here are some ways to encourage your child to wear a mask:

- **Explain why** - Use this as a teaching moment to explain why masks are important to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Use words they can understand and give them time to ask questions.
- **Give choices** - Have a couple of different masks for your children to choose from. Giving the option between wearing the blue mask or the pink mask helps make your children feel independent and in control, especially in a time where things may be changing frequently.
- **Include masks with playtime** - Let your kids play with clean cloth masks in a space where they feel comfortable. This can help them become more comfortable with masks.
- **Lead by example** - When you are going to an indoor public space, show your kids how you wear your mask and why you are wearing it. Be a role model for your kids to help normalize their use of masks.

Can a business or organization refuse entry to someone who will not wear a mask?

The [Instruction Letter](#) does not require businesses and organizations to turn away people who are not wearing a mask or face covering. Operators must recognize that there are exemptions for individuals who are unable to or cannot wear a mask. Such persons should not be turned away and should not be asked to provide proof of their exemptions.

Note that all clients must wear a mask or face covering at all times while receiving services at personal service settings. The only exception is when clients are receiving services on an area of their face that would otherwise be covered by a face covering or they are meet the exemptions for wearing a mask.

Other settings such as schools, day cares, health care facilities or congregate living facilities also have specific guidelines that they need to follow, separate from this [Letter of Instruction](#) about enclosed public spaces.

NWHU is encouraging that education and promotion of mask use is a primary consideration for businesses and organizations in enacting their policy for the use of masks/face coverings.

Does this requirement to wear a mask infringe on my rights?

No. Northwestern Health Unit's mandate includes protecting the health of everyone in our community and preventing illness. Wearing a mask or face covering helps to stop the spread of COVID-19. [The Letter of](#)

Instruction from the Medical Officer of Health was issued under the *Reopening Ontario (A Flexible Response to COVID-19) Act, 2020*, Ontario Regulation 364/20, Schedule 1, Section 2(2).

What about recreational facilities and gyms?

The requirement to wear a mask applies to all recreational, exercise and yoga facilities. Members of the public are required to wear a mask or face covering except when they are actively engaging in an athletic or fitness activity including water-based activities. This means you need to wear a mask in the reception area, the change rooms, and when travelling between exercise machines or stations. When engaging in physical activity without a mask, make sure that you are at least 2 metres / 6 feet from others.

Facility staff, including lifeguards in public spaces who are not separated by a physical barrier such as plexiglass, must also wear a mask or face covering.

What about restaurants and bars?

The requirement to wear a mask applies to restaurants and bars. You can remove your mask when you are eating and drinking, but you must wear a mask when in the lobby or reception area, when walking to your table, and when going to the restrooms. The restaurant should also be arranged so that the tables are at least 2 metres / 6 feet apart.

Restaurant and bar staff who are not behind a physical barrier such as plexiglass, or who cannot maintain a distance of 2 metres / 6 feet from each other behind that barrier, must also wear a mask or face covering.