

## COVID-19 MASK PROTECTION IN NZDF WORKPLACES

There is an established role for face masks in reducing the risk of COVID-19 airborne droplet exposure. The primary effect is in 'source control' - masks prevent infected people shedding lots of infectious droplets from nose and mouth into the environment (as the droplets are caught in the mask instead).

We are all currently primarily wearing masks or face coverings in case we have infection that we are unaware of, and by wearing masks we have less chance of unknowingly infecting others.

Masks in some situations also decrease the likelihood of breathing in infectious droplets from others. To be effective this requires a mask that is fitted well around the face, covering both the nose and mouth and doesn't let any air in other than that filtered by the mask itself.

The only masks that achieve this very effectively are N95 masks that are specifically tested to ensure each individual wearer has an effective seal. N95 sealed masks are effective in known exposure risk settings, such as health care of infected personnel, but only if used with a range of other PPE and all of the protocols that go with handling infectious environment. N95s properly fitted are not very comfortable and wearing them for extended periods takes some getting used to.

Masks that are not individually sealed and fitted but are more practical to wear on a daily basis, (non N95s or non fitted N95s) still provide some protection from breathing in larger droplets in the air from infectious people. The most effective two criteria to achieve this will be;

- how well fitted the mask is to the wearer, with no gaps around the edges of a mask, and
- sufficient filtering of air being breathed in, with minimum 3 layers of fabric and/or an established quality filter surface (such as surgical masks) that will filter large droplets effectively

### What are the key elements an effective mask in a standard community or workplace environment?

- Snug fit around nose and mouth with minimal gaps for air to get out around the mask. You are trying to ensure the air you breathe out and in goes only through mask material.
- At least three layers of cloth fabric, or an established medical filter layer such as a surgical mask or cloth mask with proper disposable filters. If you find a mask '*much easier to breath through*' than the NZDF issued 3 layer masks, or a surgical mask, it is probably not very effective.
- Masks with ventilation ports should **NOT BE WORN**. Ventilation ports that make it easy to breathe out and in, defeat the purpose of the source control and will allow an infected person to breath out droplets.
- Nose clips can be added to face coverings to help with fogging of glasses and a better fit to the face.
- A face covering over a surgical mask, can ensure a better fit for some people who have trouble getting the standard surgical masks to fit snugly, (common in smaller 'CMO sized' people).
- Hand sanitise before and after handling your mask and store in a plastic or paper bag between uses.
- Washable or disposable masks should be used, so that you ensure you are not wearing a mask that is clogged or saturated from a days breathing out. Like any filter, the effectiveness of the mask filtering droplets will be poor if it is dirty or clogged from several days breathing.

See further advice on the NZDF COVID site [How to use a face mask safely](#). Advice will continue to be added as it evolves so keep checking the website. The following is a useful video for fitting your surgical mask well. [How to wear your surgical mask](#)

### Should I be wearing an N95 mask?

- Your workplace should have established the risk and likely exposures for your role. In workplaces where exposure to known likely infected cases is unavoidable, personnel will be properly fitted and trained in PPE use, including N95 masks. Workplaces such as health staff, border workers, those in very contained environments such as aircrew, are more likely to have this requirement.

- For all others it will be a combination of good quality, well fitting masks and all of the other force health protection measures that will reduce your exposure risk.

**What should I look for in my mask wearing colleagues and staff to make sure we are best protected in the workplace?**

- Make sure staff clearly understand when and where they should wear masks in the workplace.
- Make sure staff are wearing good quality effective masks that align with the guidance above. NZDF issued 3 layer cloth masks and/or surgical masks are the minimum standard in most workplaces.
- Make sure masks are being worn as intended, well fitting, covering the nose and mouth.
- Consider the likely workplace exposure risk and talk to health or health and safety personnel to ensure you have the right mask type being used in your work setting.
- Ensure that other protective behaviours such as hand sanitising, physical distancing (even with masks on) and good use of ventilated spaces are being adhered to. Masks don't replace any of the other measures they just add a layer of protection.

**What masks are mandated for NZDF workers, and when do I have to wear them?**

- Guidance on mask use is being update by the government, however workers in NZ that fall under a vaccine mandate (as NZDF does) are required from 03 Feb 2022, to wear a face mask with consistent quality that ensures protection is optimised.
- For any public facing task conducted by NZDF personnel, this should be a minimum of a medical grade surgical mask worn for all interactions with public, including indoor locations (surgical with a face cover over the top is still an alternative to get a good snug fit)

Your workplace will have made an assessment about the mask required for your role and the times when you should be wearing one. From NZDF ENHANCED force health protection settings up, face masks are required, at a minimum for all indoor public and workplace communal locations.

**What mask should I wear outside the workplace?**

- Exposure risk arguably is actually higher outside the NZDF workplace, in locations that do not have the same protection controls and assurance in place.
- It is recommended that you continue to wear good quality, snug fitting masks such as a three layer fabric or surgical mask for all of your interactions outside your home.