Even before COVID-19 came to Canada, the effectiveness of wearing a face mask during influenza seasons has been a topic for debate among experts. This information has been prepared to inform employees of the benefits and risks of wearing face coverings such as respirators and cloth face coverings.

COVID-19 hazard assessments have been developed with our Occupational Health & Safety partners to protect the safety and wellbeing of City employees and introduce prevention controls—such as increased cleaning and disinfecting procedures and the introduction of physical distancing and barriers between workers and patrons. While these additional controls are needed in some settings, the best ways to protect yourself against COVID-19 are to stay home when sick, practice physical distancing, wash your hands, and cover coughs and sneezes. By having these measures in place and reinforcing strong practice and adherence to them, wearing respirators, medical-grade masks, non-medical masks, or cloth face coverings (either purchased or home made) to protect yourself is not needed in most cases. It is also important to note that there is still a risk of being exposed to COVID-19 even when wearing respirators and masks.

Having said that, the use of medical-grade masks, non-medical masks, and cloth face coverings is now being recommended by health professionals in limited circumstances (e.g. where physical distancing is difficult) to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus by individuals who have the virus but are not yet showing symptoms. Wearing a mask or face covering is not intended to replace other COVID-19 measures, identified above.

Masks and face coverings should only be used in addition to other steps to protect yourself and others from COVID-19. Masks and face coverings are another way to cover your mouth and nose to prevent respiratory droplets from contaminating other people or surfaces.

If you choose to wear a medical-grade mask, non-medical mask, or face covering or are required to wear one on a worksite, please follow the guidance provided by Alberta Health about their proper use:

If you choose to use a non-medical face mask:

- you must wash your hands immediately before putting it on and immediately after taking it off (in addition to practicing good hand hygiene while wearing it)
• it should fit well (non-gapping)

Masks and face coverings can become contaminated on the outside, or when touched by your hands. When wearing a mask or face covering, take the following precautions to protect yourself:
  • avoid touching your mask or face covering while wearing it
  • change the mask or face covering as soon as it gets damp or soiled
    ○ place cloth face coverings directly into the washing machine or a bag that can be emptied into the washing machine and then disposed of
  • Medical-grade or non-medical masks that cannot be washed should be discarded and replaced as soon as they get damp, soiled or crumpled:
    ○ dispose of masks directly in a lined garbage bin
  • When removing the mask, avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth and try to remove the mask by only touching the straps

It is important to remember that non-medical masks are not tested like medical masks or respirators (example: N95) and as a result their use comes with risks and limitations (Health Canada):
  • Masks can be difficult to breathe through and can prevent you from getting the required amount of oxygen needed by your body.
    ○ Persons with existing medical and respiratory conditions should consult with a healthcare professional before wearing a mask, to ensure wearing the mask does not cause additional health complications or risks.
  • Masks can easily become contaminated and will need to be changed frequently.
  • Masks need to be fitted properly for them to provide sufficient protection.
  • If you adjust a mask with unclean hands, you may be increasing your risk of exposure to COVID-19 or other respiratory viruses.

The use of medical-grade masks, non-medical masks and face coverings should not result in a relaxation of frequent hand washing practices and physical distancing.

If you bring a mask or cloth face covering from home you must bring a sealed bag to put the cloth face covering in to safely transport the device home for cleaning. You should also have multiple clean masks or face coverings, as per the guidance from Alberta Health, to be able to change the mask or face coverings when it becomes damp or soiled.

The City of Edmonton will not supply cloth face coverings to employees for the purpose of COVID-19. However, the City of Edmonton will continue to provide respiratory protective equipment where the current hazards of the workplace require it as per the Respiratory Protective Equipment Code of Practice for each business area. In some circumstances a mask or respirator will be provided to those workers who require it to go to another employer’s worksite where face coverings are mandated. Affected workers have been notified in writing of this requirement.