

## Wildfire Smoke and Dust Masks during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Wildfire smoke exposure affects the lungs and heart and can increase the risk of respiratory infections such as COVID-19. Below are answers to common questions on how to protect yourself from health risks of wildfire smoke during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

### What are the different types of masks?

- Cloth face coverings and surgical masks are used to prevent the spread of the larger droplets containing coronavirus, but will not protect from the smaller particles in wildfire smoke.
- Dust masks, also known as filtering facepiece respirators such as KN95s and N95s with exhalation valves, protect against both wildfire smoke and coronavirus. During the COVID-19 pandemic, save medically approved N95s without exhalation valves for health care workers as there is limited supply.
- Elastomeric respirators such as half face respirators are reusable and made of rubber-type material with filters. They can protect from both coronavirus and wildfire smoke.

### When should workers wear a dust mask or other respirator?

Whether a worker should wear a dust mask depends on the air quality. To help find the local air quality, go to [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov) to find the EPA Air Quality Index (AQI) at a monitoring station near your workplace.

**For outdoor exertive work from AQI 151 to 499:** Employers should implement a voluntary use program of respirators (such as KN95s, or N95s with exhalation valves) including training on donning/doffing and user seal check. Fit-testing or medical evaluations are not required for voluntary use of filtering facepiece respirators when used for wildfire smoke.

**At AQI 500:** Employers should implement a required use respiratory protection program for use of NIOSH-approved dust masks or respirators with no user-facial hair and full compliance with respiratory protection rules found in WAC 296-842 Respirators for outdoor exertive work.

### Other resources you can access

- To find an electronic copy of this Hazard Alert, go to [www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/preventing-injuries-illnesses/hazardalerts](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/preventing-injuries-illnesses/hazardalerts).
- L&I Safety web page: [www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health).
- For other related rules, contact your local L&I office or visit the safety rules webpage: [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules).
- To find the nearest L&I office, visit [www.Lni.wa.gov/Offices](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/Offices).

### How can I get help from Labor & Industries?

- The Department of Labor & Industries provides consultations, training, and technical assistance at no cost to employers. Call today to schedule a free confidential consultation or go to [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants) for more information.
- You may also call 1-800-423-7233 or visit a local L&I office and ask for the Consultation Manager.



As an alternative to respiratory protection, employers could limit employee exposure to an AQI of 151 or higher to a total of one hour or less during a shift.

Cloth face coverings or masks are still needed when not using other respirators to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

### **Do employers have to provide dust masks for voluntary use?**

When the amount of smoke exposure at work isn't likely to exceed occupational exposure limits, employers are not required to provide respiratory protection. However, you can still ask your employer to allow you to wear a dust mask or respirator voluntarily.

Employers allowing voluntary use aren't required to provide a medical evaluation or fit-testing for voluntary users of dust masks, but they are required to provide a free copy of the advisory information sheet found in WAC 296-842-11005 after determining voluntary use is a safe option for their workers.

### **How do you choose the right dust mask?**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, save NIOSH medically approved N95s for health care workers. Instead, choose NIOSH approved N95s with exhalation valves, or KN95 filtering facepiece respirators.

Choose a size that will fit snug over your nose and under your chin, and adjust the nose bridge to ensure a good seal around your face.

Masks used to slow the spread of COVID-19 such as cloth face coverings, one-strap dust mask or surgical masks that hook around your ears won't protect your lungs from the fine particles in wildfire smoke. They are still needed to prevent the spread of the larger droplets that contain coronavirus when not using other respiratory protection.

### **What other steps can an employer take to reduce wildfire smoke at work?**

Reduce outdoor work as much as possible. Keep the indoor air as clean as possible using ventilation improvements like setting up portable HEPA air purifiers or installing HEPA quality filters in HVAC systems, when compatible. Other options to consider include alternate work assignments or relocation and telecommuting to reduce employee exposure to smoke.



### **5 tips to using a dust mask**

- Follow the manufacturer's instructions for putting on and adjusting the dust mask. It should fit comfortably snug over the bridge of your nose and under your chin with one strap placed below the ears and one strap above.
- Shape the metal part of the mask so it curves snugly over the top and down the upper sides of your nose.
- Dust masks will give you the most protective fit on clean-shaven skin.
- Follow the manufacturer's recommendations for storage and reuse of your dust mask. You may not need to use a new one each day if yours is not damaged or dirty on the inside.
- It is harder to breathe through a dust mask so if use becomes uncomfortable, more frequent or longer breaks may help.

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N95 or N100 dust masks can provide some protection from wildfire smoke particles in the air. Straps must go above and below the ears.



A one-strap paper mask will NOT protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.



While a surgical mask can be an effective source control to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it will NOT protect your lungs from wildfire smoke.

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### Need more information?

More detailed information about wildfire smoke is available from the Washington Department of Health and the CDC: <https://www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/AirQuality/SmokeFromFires>

[https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/covid-19/wildfire\\_smoke\\_covid-19.html](https://www.cdc.gov/disasters/covid-19/wildfire_smoke_covid-19.html)

To find respirator rules, visit: <https://lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-rules/rules-by-chapter/?chapter=842>.

To find resources about specific safety topics like respirators, visit: <https://lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-topics/prevention-measures>.

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*This alert was developed by L&I's Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) to alert employers, labor groups, and employees to potential hazards associated with work activities. **This is not a rule and creates no new legal obligations.** The information provided includes suggested guidance on how to avoid workplace hazards and describes relevant mandatory safety and health rules. DOSH recommends you also check the related rules for additional requirements.*