

## Face coverings to protect workers from wildfire smoke during the COVID-19 pandemic

Wildfire smoke exposure poses a hazard to lungs and heart and can increase the risk of respiratory infections such as COVID-19. Below are answers to common questions about protecting yourself from the health risks of wildfire smoke during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### What are the different types of face coverings?

- 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.
- Filtering facepiece respirators (often called, “dust masks”) such as KN95s and N95s with exhalation valves protect against both wildfire smoke and coronavirus. To help conserve the limited supply of N95 masks, KN95 respirators are acceptable respiratory protection against wildfire smoke during the 2021 wildfire season.
- 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 respirator?

Whether a worker should wear a respirator depends on the air quality. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Air Quality Index (AQI) website [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov) will show the air quality at a monitoring station near your workplace.

**When the AQI is 151 or above:** Employers are required to provide respirators to workers exposed to wildfire smoke. Workers are highly encouraged to wear respiratory protection, even if they do not have health factors that put them at high risk of health effects from smoke exposure.

**When the AQI is 69 or above:** It is not required, but recommended that employers provide respirators to protect employees, especially for sensitive groups with asthma or other lung conditions.

In some situations, a worker can wear their own respirator if one is not provided by their employer.



### 5 tips to using a “dust mask” respirator

- Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for putting on and adjusting the respirator. It should fit snugly over the bridge of your nose and under your chin with one strap placed below your 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.
- Respirators (including “dust masks”) will give you the most protective fit on clean-shaven skin.
- Follow the manufacturer’s recommendations for storage and reuse of your respirator. 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 respirator, so if use becomes uncomfortable, more frequent or longer breaks may help.



Employers who provide “dust mask” respirators to protect against wildfire smoke aren’t required to provide a medical evaluation or fit-testing for voluntary respirator use, but they are required to provide the advisory information found in WAC 296-62-08590 Appendix B.

Cloth face coverings or masks may still be required when not using other respirators to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

## How do you choose the right respirator?

To help conserve the limited supply of N95s, KN95 respirators are acceptable respiratory protection against wildfire smoke during the 2021 wildfire season.

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

Masks used for preventing the spread of COVID-19 such as cloth face coverings, one-strap dust masks, 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.

## Other resources

- L&I Wildfire Smoke Safety web page: [www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-topics/topics/wildfire-smoke](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-topics/topics/wildfire-smoke)
- Websites for checking air quality:
  - EPA AirNow: [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov)
  - U.S. Forest Service AirFire: <http://tools.airfire.org/monitoring>
  - Washington Air Monitoring Network (WAQA): <https://enviwa.ecology.wa.gov/home/map>
  - Washington Smoke Information: [www.wasmoke.blogspot.com](http://www.wasmoke.blogspot.com)
  - EPA Enviroflash: [www.enviroflash.info](http://www.enviroflash.info)

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

- L&I provides consultations, training, and technical assistance at no cost to employers. Visit [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants) for more information or call 1-800-423-7233.

## Face coverings for preventing the spread of COVID-19



N95 or N100 respirators can provide robust protection from wildfire smoke particles when used properly. Straps must go above and below the ears. Follow all instruction from the manufacturer.



A one-strap paper mask will not provide adequate protection from wildfire smoke.



Surgical masks and other similar face coverings will not provide adequate protection from wildfire smoke.

*This alert is intended to bring awareness to potential safety and health hazards in the workplace. It is not a rule and creates no new legal obligations. L&I recommends employers and workers review the safety and health rules for specific requirements at [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules).*

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