

# Masks On? What Employers Need to Know About Face Coverings at Work

By Nancy Cleeland  
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**T**he future of work will involve a lot of face masks, at least in the short run, as companies do all they can to curtail the spread of COVID-19. But the rules and expectations for face masks are evolving rapidly. Should employers provide masks? Where and when should they be worn? Can employees refuse to wear them?

As with so much in this ongoing pandemic, the answers aren't always clear.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offered some guidance ([https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\\_\\_Inks.gd\\_l\\_eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJidWxsZXRpbl9saW5rX2lkjoxMDEsInVyaSI6ImJwMjpbGjJaylsmJ1bGxldGluX2lkjoiMjAyMDA2MTAuMjI3MjAxMjEiLjE1cmwiOiJodHRwczovL3d3dy5vc2hhLmdvdi9TTFRDL2NvdmlkLW5lL2NvdmlkLW5lLWZhcS5odG1sIn0.Vb8V3dz67ZM9zvSkFSsEOEMptd-5FYoG-5FYsVfzQSOH-5FE8\\_br\\_79676142407-2DI&d=DwMFAA&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=I8hrXaCtq0NkHyqxnGg12NWr9OdBLdbaR7syXgv\\_DkE&m=xUqq1BlgFswHhOcG43UwW38RGKeAmEsZPLu-neLNmhk&s=dGH\\_9PXn\\_E3RIGAf34IEH4IWDxgfjZ4XhGMcNm7pm8E&e=](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__Inks.gd_l_eyJhbGciOiJIUzI1NiJ9.eyJidWxsZXRpbl9saW5rX2lkjoxMDEsInVyaSI6ImJwMjpbGjJaylsmJ1bGxldGluX2lkjoiMjAyMDA2MTAuMjI3MjAxMjEiLjE1cmwiOiJodHRwczovL3d3dy5vc2hhLmdvdi9TTFRDL2NvdmlkLW5lL2NvdmlkLW5lLWZhcS5odG1sIn0.Vb8V3dz67ZM9zvSkFSsEOEMptd-5FYoG-5FYsVfzQSOH-5FE8_br_79676142407-2DI&d=DwMFAA&c=nQOnw6HHAeKBNxj23OXhOw&r=I8hrXaCtq0NkHyqxnGg12NWr9OdBLdbaR7syXgv_DkE&m=xUqq1BlgFswHhOcG43UwW38RGKeAmEsZPLu-neLNmhk&s=dGH_9PXn_E3RIGAf34IEH4IWDxgfjZ4XhGMcNm7pm8E&e=)) on June 10, noting that "millions of Americans will be wearing masks in their workplace for the first time" as businesses reopen and offices repopulate after months of stay-at-home orders. "OSHA generally recommends that employers encourage workers to wear face coverings at work," the agency said, but it added that employers can decide not to, "based on the specific circumstances present at the worksite."

Engineering and administrative controls, such as improving air ventilation and ensuring strict social distancing, are preferred ways to protect workers. Face masks should be used in addition to those controls or when those measures aren't feasible, according to OSHA guidance.

But OSHA is unambiguous about one thing: Because cloth face-coverings are meant to protect others, not the wearer, they are not considered personal protective equipment (PPE) and so are not subject to federal requirements to provide them and train workers in their proper use. In contrast, surgical masks and respirators that protect workers from exposure to infections or toxic substances at hospitals, construction sites and other settings are PPE and must be provided with training.

## SHRM RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Coronavirus and COVID-19 ([www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/Pages/communicable-diseases.aspx))

### Mixed Signals

If employers are confused, it's no wonder. After initially discouraging mask use by the public, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reversed course in early April and said everyone should wear a face covering when near others (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>) to prevent unknowingly spreading the disease. This is especially important because some people with COVID-19 never show symptoms, the CDC said. "Cloth face-coverings provide an extra layer to help prevent the respiratory droplets [that spread the infection] from traveling in the air and onto other people."

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Although the federal government considers mask usage at the workplace to be voluntary, for now at least, some states require that masks be worn (<https://www.littler.com/publication-press/publication/facing-your-face-mask-duties-list-statewide-orders>) in certain occupations, especially among public-facing employees, such as restaurant servers and hair stylists. Each state has a slightly different take on when and where masks are required. For example, Connecticut (<https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/Office-of-the-Governor/Executive-Orders/Lamont-Executive-Orders/Executive-Order-No-7BB.pdf?la=en>) requires mask use in office buildings among other settings, and in Ohio ([https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/OHOOD/2020/05/29/file\\_attachments/1462932/Signed%20Director%27s%20Order%20Updated%20and%20Revised%20Business%20Guidance%20and%20Social%20Distancing.pdf](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/OHOOD/2020/05/29/file_attachments/1462932/Signed%20Director%27s%20Order%20Updated%20and%20Revised%20Business%20Guidance%20and%20Social%20Distancing.pdf)), all businesses must provide masks and require employees to wear them or provide written justification for not doing so. Where masks are required, employers generally must provide them under the state laws.

A survey of HR professionals (<https://shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/FOR%20MEDIA%20SHRM%20CV19%20Return%20to%20Work%20HR%20data%20v4.pdf>) by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in mid-May found that 86 percent required or planned to require employees to wear face masks at work, and 80 percent of that group planned to provide and pay for them.

All the mask-wearing regulations make exceptions for cases in which wearing a mask could worsen health problems for employees who already have trouble breathing. In those cases, employers should consider alternatives, such as a clear face shield or allowing the employee to work in a location away from others.

OSHA's guidance notes other workplace situations in which cloth face masks might not be ideal. "For some workers, employers may determine that wearing cloth face-coverings presents or exacerbates a hazard. For example, cloth face-coverings could become contaminated with chemicals used in the work environment, causing workers to inhale the chemicals that collect on the face covering. Over the duration of a work shift, cloth face-coverings might also become damp (from workers breathing) or collect infectious material from the work environment (e.g., droplets of other peoples' infectious respiratory secretions)."

Cloth face masks can also interfere with communication for employees who rely on lip reading. In those cases, OSHA recommends using masks with clear plastic windows around the mouth.

### **Masks Can Boost Employee Comfort Levels**

Apart from satisfying any legal obligations, providing masks to employees and encouraging their use to prevent the spread of infection can make other workers feel more comfortable and willing to come into the workplace.

"To some extent, it's about reducing the friction of employees who are concerned about catching COVID," said Leeatt Rothschild, founder of Packed with Purpose, a Chicago company that works with over 1,000 companies to create corporate gifts. "Basically, companies want to make employees feel comfortable and confident returning to work. And in order to make that a little easier, they're providing masks." Knowing that co-workers are likely to be masked should "reassure employees who may not want to return to the office," she said.

*[Members-only HR form: COVID-19 Back-to-Work Checklist ([www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/covid-19-back-to-work-checklist.aspx](http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/hr-forms/pages/covid-19-back-to-work-checklist.aspx))]*

Some employers are even sending masks to employees who are working from home as a morale boost, said Tiff Kitts, sales director at Real Thread, a screen-printing shop based in Orlando, Fla. "They're often part of a thank-you kit that helps create a sense of unity among employees," she said.

Real Thread's bread and butter has long been T-shirts and corporate branding at trade shows, but in April, the small company quickly pivoted to selling and customizing face masks, tapping into existing distribution channels to source masks when they were hard to find. Since then, it has sold 75,000 custom-printed masks, as well as 18,000 blank masks for those who prefer to not have a logo. Among the logos they've screened are an Amazon smile and a barber's razor blades.

"It's not only logos, but even motivational slogans or a quote on the mask just to add a little flair," said Kitts. "Now that masks are becoming a normal thing, you need to mix it up, or it would be like wearing the same blouse or T-shirt every day."



Gone are the days of improvising masks out of old T-shirts at home. As Kitts noted, "Masks are far more accessible than they were at first. You can buy a three-pack at Target now."

A search on Amazon's website returns more than 200,000 results for washable face masks. Etsy, the craft site that quickly began promoting homemade masks, sold more than 12 million in April alone, according to investors.

General Motors reopened a shuttered transmission plant in Warren, Mich., and turned it into a mask factory (<https://www.freep.com/story/money/cars/general-motors/2020/06/08/gm-warren-transmission-plant-coronavirus/3135789001/>), which now supplies masks to GM workers across the country. Swaddle Designs, a baby blanket company in Seattle owned by a former nurse switched to making masks when supplies were low at hospitals, and it now sells them in bulk to businesses.

Employers looking to brand the masks they supply also have plenty of options, as companies that once personalized golf clothing, pens, wristbands and more have moved into the mask-branding business.

### Mask Care and Maintenance

Properly using and caring for masks is essential to their effectiveness. The CDC notes (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wear-cloth-face-coverings.html>) that masks should cover the mouth and nose, be secured under the chin and fit snugly on all sides. It's important to wash your hands before putting on a mask and after removing it.

In addition, masks should be washed after each use (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-to-wash-cloth-face-coverings.html>), either in a washing machine or by soaking in a bleach solution for 5 minutes. They should be dried on a high setting or air-dried in the sun, the agency said.

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