

HIV, COVID & the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

A holistic COVID-19 prevention strategy



The use of PPE in NSW

- In NSW there have been a range of health directives about mandatory mask wearing since early 2020. These have included the use of face masks within the community, on public transport, in public spaces such as hospitals, airports and aged care facilities, and in situations where physical distancing of 1.5 meters cannot be comfortably maintained, and penalties and fines for not using masks where required.
- Check the latest [NSW Government health directives](#) to stay up-to-date with recent updated requirements.

PPE remains a key strategy to prevent community transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) both now and into the future. Using PPE correctly, as part of a [comprehensive prevention strategy](#), has supported the very low levels of community transmission throughout Australia. While masks are an inconvenience, they are vital in preventing COVID-19 transmission, because the virus spreads rapidly through the air we breathe.

Face masks, filter respirators (such as P2 or N95), gloves, goggles, glasses, face shields, gowns and aprons are all examples of PPE used by the Australia health workforce as a '[standard precaution](#)' to prevent transmission of COVID-19.

In our day-to-day lives, there has been a considerable shift to using PPE [in the general community](#). Using PPE and especially wearing a mask continues to form part of a [holistic combined COVID-19 prevention strategy](#) which also includes:

- Being fully vaccinated
- Washing your hands often, thoroughly, using soap and water or alcohol based sanitiser
- Avoiding touching your face, especially your nose, eyes and mouth
- Keeping a 1.5m distance between yourself and other people
- Do not shake hands, hug, or kiss in greeting
- If possible, limit cash transactions.

If you want to talk about your concerns regarding COVID-19 as a person living with HIV, or have questions about your use of PPE, please contact a Positive Life NSW Peer Support Officer, on (02) 8357 8386 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or email contact@positivelife.org.au

The appropriate use of PPE

Putting on and taking off your PPE correctly is just as important as wearing it. Misusing PPE builds a false sense of security. It undermines public health strategy and can encourage people to disregard the primary prevention guidelines put in place for our protection. If you don't put your PPE on correctly, you greatly increase the risk of acquiring and transmitting COVID-19. We also highlight [the importance of correctly disposing of masks](#) into a secure container or bin after use as an added precaution to protect others. It's especially important to use all these precautions when visiting vulnerable friends, family and community members.

The different types of masks

N95 respirators offer the greatest protection against COVID, while surgical masks and cloth masks are also beneficial. N95 respirators lower the odds of testing positive to COVID by [83%](#), [surgical masks by 66%](#) and [cloth masks by 56%](#). When everyone correctly uses masks, the viral load of airborne COVID is much lower. NSW Health offers [a number of resources](#) on [applying and wearing a face mask safely](#), including [P2/N95 respirator masks](#), [surgical masks](#) and [reusable cloth masks](#).

Wearing masks in spaces that are more confined or where distancing is not easy to maintain is a protective practice. Examples of where you might choose to use a mask (even if there is no rule in place) include at supermarkets, shops with narrow aisles, as a passenger in a car, a crowded outdoor setting, and indoor spaces that do not have fresh air from the outdoors.

Limitations of disposable masks

These masks are manufactured of material that is not designed to be cleaned and should be discarded after one use. Be mindful that once used, a disposable mask could be contaminated with COVID and should be disposed of in a waste container. It is important to wash your hands after removing and disposing of your mask. You should also wash your hands after touching any object or surface.

Disposable masks are also usually cheaper. Moving them to below your nose or chin, to answer the phone, smoke, drink, or order something at a café compromises your safety from COVID-19. If you need

to remove your mask to answer the phone, or eating and drinking, the mask should be removed carefully from behind your head, not touching the front of the mask.

If you use disposable masks, you will need to carry several masks with you. If you use your phone while you have the mask on, you will need to clean your phone before using it again, after you take off your mask.

Use of disposable gloves

Physical distancing and washing hands regularly with soap and water for 20 seconds, or the use of a 60% alcohol based sanitiser or 70% isopropanol based sanitiser, is a better control measure than wearing gloves in non-clinical community settings like the home, office workplaces, and other public spaces. There is [insufficient evidence that gloves are a preventative measure for COVID](#) in the community in most occupations.

If you are wearing gloves and touch your face, you will have transferred organisms to your face via the glove. Slipping them on and off regularly also transfers organisms inside the glove. Wearing disposable gloves can also cause skin irritation, contact dermatitis, sweating, or other sensitivities. Disposable gloves should not be re-used and multi-use gloves should not be shared.



For more information phone 02 8357 8386 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit www.positivelife.org.au

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The voice of all people living with HIV

Positive Life NSW