

# GUIDANCE NOTE: ALL INDUSTRIES CONDUCTING A COVID-19 RISK ASSESSMENT FOR WEARING FACE MASKS



## Situation

From 11 March 2022, Public Health now only requires face masks to be worn in certain high-risk and vulnerable settings. For full details of where masks are required, go to [coronavirus.tas.gov.au](https://coronavirus.tas.gov.au).

However, employers of other workplaces need to consider if they still need to use masks to reduce the risks of COVID-19 entering or being transmitted in their workplace.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2012* requires employers to manage hazards within their workplace. COVID-19 is a workplace hazard, so you must conduct a risk assessment to reduce the risks of COVID-19 entering or being transmitted in your workplace.

Conducting a risk assessment will help you make informed decisions about the effectiveness of wearing face masks in your workplace.

## Face masks as control measures

Facemasks are an effective COVID-19 control measure, when worn consistently and correctly. Wearing a face mask protects the health of your workers, contractors and visitors, by reducing COVID-19 entering and spreading in your workplace.

By reducing transmission, and therefore absences from your workforce, wearing face masks can reduce harm to on your business continuity.

Encouraging others to follow your lead in wearing masks can also reduce the risk of coronavirus spreading within our community.

## How to do a risk assessment

You should use the same risk assessment methods that you use for all other hazards in your workplace hazards.

This involves identifying the hazard, assessing the risks, and applying the hierarchy of control to work out the

most effective control measures needed to remove or reduce those risks. You must consider the *actual risks in your workplace* based on *your specific circumstances*. Every workplace is different and your risk assessment should reflect this.

Don't forget you must consult with workers (including contractors) when you conduct your risk assessment.

You should have already done an assessment when preparing your COVID-19 Safety Plan and, in some cases, determining if mandatory vaccination was appropriate for your workplace.

See our [Guidance note on How to conduct a covid-19 risk assessment](#) for full information.

## Factors to consider

To work out if your workplace needs to continue to use face masks, think about:

- ▶ the number of active cases of COVID-19 in the community or your local municipality (the likelihood that the virus may enter your workplace)
- ▶ the type (variant) of the virus within the community and how transmissible it is
- ▶ the vaccination status of your workers. Vaccinated workers present a lower risk
- ▶ ability of workers and customers to achieve and maintain adequate physical distancing (1.5 metres apart)
- ▶ the volume of customers and visitors entering your workplace. The greater the volume, the higher the risk of COVID-19 entering your workplace
- ▶ the duration of time your customers and visitors spend in your workplace. The more time in the workplace, the greater the risk
- ▶ the layout of your workplace and any points of congestion that may affect physical distancing

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- ▶ the distance between workstations and the number of workers in any given space (again, that may affect physical distancing)
- ▶ the need for your workers to enter other business or workplaces where you cannot control the COVID-19 safety measures
- ▶ your hygiene control measures and practices such as cleaning routines and use of sanitiser. This can affect the spread of COVID-19 in your workplace
- ▶ any vulnerable people in your workplace, who may be at higher risk of becoming seriously ill with COVID-19
- ▶ the impact that multiple infections in your workplace may have on your business operations and continuity.

## The difference face masks could make

To assess the impact of wearing face masks in your workplace, conduct the risk assessment without using masks as a control measure — then do the same assessment where face masks are being used. The risks should be significantly different.

For example:

- ▶ if your workers are unable to maintain 1.5 metres between them while performing their tasks, and are not wearing face masks, then the risk of transmission would likely be high
- ▶ if you put the same workers in face masks, then the risk of transmission is likely to be low to medium, depending on the type of mask worn.

Once you've done your risk assessment, you may decide you do not require face masks to be worn in your workplace.

However, you may find some workers still choose to wear masks at work to manage their own risks. This should be encouraged. Where a worker wants to provide and use their own face mask at work, make sure the face mask is safe and suitable for your workplace and work tasks being done.

## Types of masks

The type of mask matters too. According to health sources (including the [American Centre for Disease Control/CDC](#) and the [Australian Government](#)):

- ▶ homemade or cloth masks offer the least protection (according to the CDC, these masks lower the odds of testing positive by 56%)
- ▶ surgical masks offer better protection (lowering the odds of testing positive by 66%)
- ▶ and respirators (known as N95, P2 or KN95 masks) offer the strongest protection (lowering the odds of testing positive by 83%)

Wearing them consistently and correctly is also necessary to achieve higher levels of protection. See [coronavirus.tas.gov.au](https://coronavirus.tas.gov.au) for guidance.

## Other respiratory protection

Some workplaces may already require workers to wear respiratory protective equipment (RPE) to control risks associated with their work.

Where RPE is worn at the workplace, the employer must conduct a risk assessment to ensure the level of RPE provided to workers controls the risks associated with the work done, including the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

## Training and policies for wearing face masks

Employers must also provide their workers with policies, procedures, and training/information/supervision on:

- ▶ the need to use face masks in the workplace
- ▶ the type/standard required (cloth, surgical, or respirator)
- ▶ how to put on, wear correctly and take off, and when and where to use face masks
- ▶ storage, maintenance and cleaning of reusable face masks or disposal of single use face masks.