



Association of Biosafety for Australia and New Zealand

Discourages the use of personal cloth face masks in laboratories

Position Statement

11 August 2020

The Association of Biosafety for Australia and New Zealand (ABSANZ) advises that:

- The wearing of cloth face masks in laboratories should be discouraged and considered as an appropriate infection control measure only when travelling to and from the laboratory
- The use of disposable single use surgical type masks or N95/P2 masks as defined by risk assessment, are suitable where contact with hazardous substances is likely
- Masks should be changed at regular intervals or if the mask becomes damaged, contaminated, or damp, using hand decontamination before and after removal
- Face masks utilised within laboratories for infection control purposes, do not replace any other recommended or required personal protective equipment necessary for certain tasks or workspaces (e.g. goggles, face shields or respirators) and they should not interfere with the fit or function of other personal protective equipment.

Requirements for wearing face masks

The Australian Government Department of Health does not generally recommend the wearing of face masks by healthy people in the community. The wearing of face masks is also not generally required in laboratories unless necessary for certain duties or workspaces.

However, there may be occasions when the government and or health officials recommend that the wearing of face masks where there is increased risk of community transmission and physical distancing is difficult to maintain. This is especially prudent where asymptomatic infection is known to occur.

The Victorian Government has recently implemented mandatory requirements for the general public to wear face masks. If you live in Victoria you must wear a face covering when leaving home unless you have a lawful reason for not doing so (see [Face coverings: Victoria](#)).

The use of face masks is in addition to other infection control requirements such as:

- social distancing—maintaining physical separation of at least 1.5m
- limiting the number of people in an enclosed space (1 person per 4m²)
- maintaining good hygiene through regular hand washing
- minimising the touching of your face, eyes and nose

- maintaining workplace logs to facilitate contact tracing etc.

Infection control in the laboratory environment

ABSANZ recommends the use of disposable, water resistant surgical masks. This mask will not only satisfy the requirement for face covering, but also provide limited protection from large droplets.

Surgical face masks are only effective if properly used. ABSANZ notes the following advice provided by [Safework Australia](#):

How to put on a face mask

1. Clean your hands thoroughly with soap and water (for a minimum of 20 seconds) or hand sanitiser before touching the mask or removing it from its packaging. Dry your hands and make sure you do not touch any surfaces before you get your mask (like opening a door).
2. Remove a mask from its packaging and make sure the mask has no obvious tears, holes or faults. Avoid touching the front of the mask.
3. Identify the top of the mask (generally it has a bendable edge that will mould to the shape of your nose) and the front of the mask (normally a mask is coloured on the front) with the white side towards your face.
4. If your mask has ear loops, hold the mask by the ear loops and place a loop around each ear. If your mask has ties bring the mask to nose level and place the upper ties over the ears to the crown of your head and tie with a bow (leave the bottom set of ties at this time).
5. If your mask has a band, hold the mask in your hands with the nose piece or top of the mask at your fingertips, the headbands will hang loosely below your hands, then bring the mask to your nose level and pull the top strap over your head to rest on the crown of your head, then pull the bottom strap all the way over your head to rest at the nape of your neck.
6. Mould the nose piece to the shape of your nose using your fingertips.
7. If your face mask has ties take the bottom ties (one in each hand) and tie at the nape of your neck with a bow.
8. Adjust the bottom of the mask over your mouth and under your chin.

How to remove a face mask

1. Clean your hands thoroughly with soap and water (for a minimum of 20 seconds) or hand sanitiser before removing your mask
2. Only touch the ear loops, ties or bands avoiding touching the front of the mask as it may potentially be contaminated.
3. If your mask has ear loops hold both of the ear loops and gently lift and pull the mask away from you and away from your face.
4. If your mask has ties untie the bottom bow first (at the nape of your neck), then untie the top bow and pull the mask away from your face as the ties are loosened.
5. If your mask has bands lift the bottom strap over your head-first, then pull the top strap over your head and pull the mask away from you and away from your face.

6. Throw the mask directly into a bin. If working in a PC2 laboratory, dispose as biohazardous waste.
7. Clean your hands thoroughly with soap and water (for a minimum of 20 seconds) or hand sanitiser.

Where a risk assessment indicates that a respirator is needed to minimise exposure to harmful aerosols or fine particles. A properly fitted N95/P2 respirator must be worn and laboratory personnel appropriately trained on how to safely put on, perform a seal check, remove and dispose or decontaminate the respirator. Detailed guidance on respiratory protection can be found in Section 10 of AS/NZS 2243.3:2010, *Safety in laboratories, Part 3: Microbiological safety and containment*.

About ABSANZ

ABSANZ is the peak body for Australia and New Zealand in biosafety and biosecurity. Our purpose is to protect people, the community and the environment through advancing knowledge in biosafety and bio-risk management.

ABSANZ also provides position statements on its website (www.absanz.org.au) that champion best practice in biosafety and biosecurity. ABSANZ also provides education materials that is available to both its Members and the wider community.