



# Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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## Health Tip: Will wearing a face mask keep you from getting H1N1 (swine) influenza?

If you've passed through an international airport lately, undoubtedly you have seen people wearing face masks, presumably to prevent contracting swine flu (H1N1 influenza). The actual effectiveness of respirators and facemasks in preventing transmission of H1N1 (or seasonal influenza for that matter), is unknown. A recent study did show that frequent hand washing along with the use of face masks helps to prevent the transmission of influenza among household contacts. This study, however, did not look specifically at those with H1N1 influenza, nor did it consider the use of face masks in a community setting such as an airport. Because of public concern, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have recently provided guidance on the use of masks and respirators should a H1N1 influenza pandemic occur.



**What is the difference in a face mask and a respirator?** Facemasks are loose-fitting, disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth. They are often used by dentists or surgeons primarily to stop droplets from being spread by the person wearing them. They also keep splashes or sprays from reaching the mouth and nose of the person wearing the facemask. They are not effective in keeping small particles that may contain viruses from being inhaled.

Respirators (a N95 or higher filtering facepiece respirator), on the other hand, will protect the wearer from breathing in very small particles that could contain viruses. Ideally, they should fit tightly, so that the inhaled air passes through the filter material. These are often used in construction and other jobs that involve dust and small particles. Some healthcare workers, such as nurses and doctors, use these types of respirators when taking care of patients with diseases that can be spread through the air.

### When should mask be considered to prevent contracting swine flu?

Information on the effectiveness of facemasks and respirators for decreasing the risk of influenza infection in community settings is extremely limited. In the judgment of the CDC, the use of facemasks and respirators in community and home settings is generally not recommended for persons who are not at increased risk of severe illness from influenza. For those who are at risk

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(children younger than 5 years old, persons aged 65 years or older, children and adolescents on long-term aspirin therapy, pregnant women, children and adults with chronic diseases or who are immunosuppressed) a facemask or respirator should be used in a crowded community setting in the event of an H1N1 outbreak, or if the at-risk person is a caretaker for someone with H1N1 influenza.

In a non-medical occupational setting, face masks or respirators are generally not recommended. If exposure to a co-worker with confirmed or suspected H1N1 influenza is unavoidable, use of a facemask or respirator could be considered. In the health care setting, anyone caring for persons with known or suspected H1N1 influenza should wear a respirator. Those at high risk for influenza complications should consider temporary reassignment to avoid exposure to influenza.

**Should an influenza victim use a face mask?** In spite of what is apparently occurring in airports, it is the person with confirmed or suspected H1N1 influenza who should consider using a facemask or respirator, rather than the person who is well. This is to stop virus-containing droplets from being spread by the person with a H1N1 infection. For those persons who are ill with confirmed or suspected H1N1 influenza, the CDC has issued the following recommendations for facemask use in various settings:

- When sharing common spaces with other household members, wearing a facemask is recommended. If a facemask is not available or tolerated, use tissue to cover the mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- In the health care setting (when outside of patient room), the person with H1N1 influenza should wear a facemask, if possible.
- When the person with H1N1 influenza is in a non-health care setting, wearing a facemask is recommended. Otherwise, use tissue to cover cough/sneeze.
- When breastfeeding, wearing a facemask preferred, if available and tolerable. Otherwise, use tissue to cover cough/sneeze.

**What are the most important measures in preventing the spread of H1N1 influenza?** The CDC has provided a list of measures that can help reduce the risk of contracting influenza A (H1N1) virus. Note that use of a facemask or respirator is not one of these. No single action will provide complete protection, however. Combining these measures below is the best way to help decrease the likelihood of transmission:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use alcohol-based hand cleaner when soap and water are not available.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- People who are sick with an influenza-like illness (fever plus at least a cough or sore throat and possibly other symptoms like runny nose, body aches, headaches, chills, fatigue, vomiting and diarrhea) should stay home and keep away from others as much as possible. This includes

avoiding travel, for at least 24 hours after fever is gone except to get medical care or for other necessities.

- Avoid close contact (i.e. being within about 6 feet) with persons with an influenza-like illness.

For those caring for a person at home with confirmed or suspected H1N1 infection, the CDC recommends the following:

- Avoid close contact (less than about 6 feet away) with the sick person as much as possible.
- If you must have close contact with the sick person (for example, hold a sick infant), spend the least amount of time possible in close contact and try to wear a facemask (for example, surgical mask) or N95 disposable respirator.
- Wear an N95 respirator if you help a sick person with respiratory treatments using a nebulizer or inhaler, as directed by their doctor. Respiratory treatments should be performed in a separate room away from common areas of the house when at all possible.
- Used facemasks and N95 respirators should be taken off and placed immediately in the regular trash so they don't touch anything else.
- Avoid re-using disposable facemasks and N95 respirators if possible. If a reusable fabric facemask is used, it should be laundered with normal laundry detergent and tumble-dried in a hot dryer.
- After you take off a facemask or N95 respirator, clean your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

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