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Some face masks are more protective than others—here are the types you should avoid

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COVID-19 has evolved greatly over the past two years. At this point in the pandemic, mask mandates have been lifted across many states and health experts are cautiously optimistic that the U.S. could soon shift to an “endemic phase” of the pandemic.

Even so, cases are rising again in Europe and there's even a new variant in circulation called “deltacron.” Though experts say it's too early to be worried about the latest variant, the omicron variant is still in circulation and is easily transmissible. Because of this, masks are still required on public transportation like planes, trains and buses for the time being.

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For those who are still wearing masks or need them for travel, it's important to choose the right kind that offers the best protection. This begs the question: What kind of mask should you be buying—and what kind of mask should you avoid? While wearing a mask is absolutely better than not wearing one at all, there are some masks that just aren't cutting it when it comes to protecting yourself or others.

With so much information floating around as to which masks are the best and which aren't ideal, we're here to make it a little simpler. Here are the types of masks experts recommend that you avoid, along with the protective masks you should be shopping for instead.

Face masks to avoid:

Masks with valves

While you can use any NIOSH-approved N95 mask—medical or industrial—you should stray away from N95 masks with valves on them. Despite them feeling more breathable, the CDC recommends against these masks in healthcare settings as they don't protect those around you.

"Those masks [with valves] protect you, but not the person in your vicinity. In fact, it may make it riskier for people in your vicinity because it blows out your air," says Dr. Cassandra Pierre, an infectious disease specialist at Boston Medical Center.

Pierre reminds us that masks are for the protection of all involved. "We're putting on our masks not only to protect ourselves, but the people in our immediate environment, and having those valves open does not do the latter."

Masks that are too big for your face

If your mask is too large for your face, the mask is not working for you or for those around you. The seal of a mask around your face is an important factor in terms of protection. Wearing a mask that's too large for your face can create unwanted gaps or openings around your mask that can allow viral particles to enter—or escape. Not to mention, a mask that's too big or constantly slipping around your nose or the ear loops can be uncomfortable or annoying to wear throughout the day.

You may need to try different masks or a combination of mask layering with a surgical mask beneath a cloth mask to find your best fit. N95s will be your best bet for a snug fit to your face, as they are designed to do exactly that.

For KN95s and surgical masks, many manufacturers make both masks in smaller sizes to fit kids or those with smaller faces. These Smaller or Children's Sized Powecom Kids' KN95 Masks from Bona Fide Masks, for example, are suitable for smaller faces and can help provide a better seal around the face.

If you're having trouble with gaps on a surgical mask, there are a few tricks you can use to achieve a better fit—just see the video above.

Get the Smaller or Children's Sized Powecom Kids' KN95 Masks (10-Pack) from Bona Fide Masks for \$13

Fake N95 and KN95 masks

While shopping for an N95 mask, you may come across some counterfeit masks being sold online. These masks may look and even feel like N95 or KN95 masks, but they may not meet the necessary testing standards or criteria for real masks.

While they may be hard to spot initially, there are ways you determine if the masks are real, especially for American-approved and -certified N95 masks. Ensure that the N95 mask has been tested and certified by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). You can check to see if a particular N95 brand or model is NIOSH-approved by taking a look at the NIOSH-Certified Equipment List.

Some signs of a counterfeit N95 respirator include "NIOSH" being spelled incorrectly or they lack an approval number on the respirator or headband. In addition, N95s specifically should use headbands, not ear loops—ones with ear loops may be real KN95s or KF94s, but *not* real N95s.

KN95s can be more difficult to authenticate, as there's an estimate that roughly 60% of KN95s on the market in the U.S. are counterfeit. A tale-tell sign that a KN95 is fake is if it says it's "NIOSH-approved"—KN95 masks cannot receive NIOSH approval as KN95s are certified based on Chinese-specific standards. The same goes for "FDA-approved" masks or masks listed as "genuine KN95."

KN95s should also have printed text and numbers on your mask that let you know it's met international standards. Authentic KN95 masks will have a serial number starting with "GB" printed on them—specifically, "GB 2626-2006" or "GB 2626-2019"—and many will have a company name, too.

Masks that lack sufficient layers of protection

While masks should always be comfortable to breathe in, some masks—especially reusable cloth ones—may not be protective enough, especially with the highly-contagious omicron variant. Masks that are loosely woven or made from thin, single-layered fabric are one of the least protective masks, according to the CDC. That's why health experts recently advocated for masks with more advanced filtration such as N95s and KN95s.

You may want to opt for a cloth mask that has multiple thick and protective layers, or cloth masks with a pocket for a filter insert. To best upgrade your cloth masks for more protection, experts recommend double masking by adding a surgical mask under your cloth mask. This can help to enhance the number of protective layers you have and also improve the fit of your mask.

What are the best masks to buy?

Right now, experts are calling for better masking across the board, with many saying cloth masks are just not protective enough against certain COVID-19 variants anymore. If you're looking for the best mask as far as protection and fit go, the gold standard is the N95 mask. KN95 masks are also great options as they offer more breathability as well as comfortable ear loops while providing a high level of filtration.

When shopping for an N95 mask, you can check the CDC's list of NIOSH-approved N95 respirators to confirm that the mask you're looking at has been tested and meets NIOSH regulations. All masks we list as "NIOSH-approved" have been cross-referenced with the NIOSH-approved list. Keep in mind that NIOSH only certifies adult PPE, so there are no kid's N95 masks on the market. However, KN95s are great alternatives that are often suitable for kids.

Our team at Reviewed continues to put KN95 masks to the test, ordering popular ones from online retailers to see if they are trustworthy. The following KN95 masks on this list are either from a reputable distributor or have been bought and vetted by the Reviewed team.

N95 and KN95 masks for adults

Amazon

- **Get the Supply Aid KN95 Face Masks, 5-pack from Amazon for \$12.99**
- **Get the MAGID N95 Respirator Masks, 10-pack from Amazon for \$13**
- **Get the 3M N95 Particulate Respirator (NIOSH-approved), 20-pack from Amazon for \$17.85**
- **Get the Hotodeal KN95 Face Masks, 20-pack from Amazon for \$9.34**
- **Get the WWDOLL KN95 Face Masks, 25-pack from Amazon for \$19.74**
- **Get the Kimberly-Clark N95 Pouch Respirator (NIOSH-Approved), 50-pack from Amazon for \$47.93**

Project N95

- **Get the 3M Cone Style (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Project N95 for \$20**
- **Get the BYD Flat Fold DE2322 N95 Respirators (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Project N95 for \$24.95**
- **Get the Harley Flat Fold L-188 (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Project N95 for \$45**
- **Get the Demetech Flat Fold (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Project N95 for \$50**

Bona Fide Masks

- **Get the Harley N95 Respirator Face Mask (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Bona Fide Masks for \$45**
- **Get the Powecom KN95 Respirator Face Mask (10-Pack) from Bona Fide Masks for \$12**

WellBefore

- **Get the N95 Medical Respirator Mask (NIOSH-Approved) from WellBefore From \$1.59/each**
- **Get the KN95 Masks from WellBefore from \$1.19/mask**

Lowe's

- **Get the 3M Performance Respirator N95 (NIOSH-Approved) from Lowe's for \$6.68**

The Home Depot

- **Get the HDX N95 Respirator Mask (NIOSH-Approved) (10-Pack) from The Home Depot for \$19.98**
- **Get the 3M Aura Particulate Respirator N95 (NIOSH-Approved) (10-Pack) from The Home Depot for \$21.48**

Menard's

- **Get the 3M N95 Respirator Mask (NIOSH-Approved) (20-Pack) from Menard's for \$20.46**

KN95 masks for kids

Bona Fide Masks

- **Get the Smaller or Children's Sized Powecom KN95 Respirator Mask (10-Pack) from Bona Fide Masks for \$13**

WellBefore

- **Get the KN95 Kids Masks from WellBefore from \$1.19/mask**

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