

# Disposable Respirators

A disposable respirator fits over the nose and mouth. It removes very small particles from the air you breathe. These particles include germs (like viruses, bacteria, and mold) and other kinds of dust. A disposable respirator does not have replacement parts. It is meant to be thrown away after use.



## Is a disposable respirator the same as a dust mask?

No. Although some people confuse these two terms and call disposable respirators “dust masks,” a disposable respirator is different than a dust mask. A disposable respirator has been tested by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) to make sure it can remove very small particles. A disposable respirator has the name “NIOSH” and a label like “N95” on it. Dust masks have not been tested by NIOSH and may not remove very small particles.

## Is a disposable respirator the same as a surgical mask?

No. A disposable respirator is different than a surgical mask. Surgical masks are not meant to protect the person wearing the mask from particles in the air. They are meant to protect other people (like a patient in an operating room) from germs that the person wearing the mask has. Surgical masks have not been tested by NIOSH and may not remove very small particles.

## Is a disposable respirator the same as a gas mask?

No. A disposable respirator is different than a gas mask. A disposable respirator does not remove gases, chemicals, or vapors from the air you breathe. A disposable respirator only removes particles. Some non-disposable respirators can protect against gases, chemicals, and vapors. If you need a respirator for gases, chemicals, or vapors, contact a respirator expert or manufacturer.

## Where do I get a disposable respirator?

You may find disposable respirators:

- at hardware stores
- at home improvement stores

- at medical supply stores
- on the internet
- by contacting the manufacturer

## When should I wear a disposable respirator?

A disposable respirator should be worn:

- when in a moldy building, such as after a flood
- when visiting or caring for someone in the hospital with tuberculosis
- if recommended during an outbreak of influenza (“flu”) or other infection
- if recommended by your doctor
- if required in your workplace

Some people may choose to wear a disposable respirator when doing dusty work in the yard or home.

## Will a disposable respirator remove all particles in the air?

A new disposable respirator that is worn correctly removes most (90% or more) particles in the air. Some particles (10% or less) will still be in the air you breathe. If a disposable respirator is not worn correctly or is damaged, it will not work as well. For very hazardous particles, even a disposable respirator that is worn correctly may not provide enough protection. If you have questions about whether a disposable respirator will provide enough protection, contact a respirator expert or manufacturer.

## How do I put on a disposable respirator?

Below are general steps for putting on a disposable respirator. Instructions for the model you are using may be different. For example, the order of putting the straps over your head may be different for your model, or your model may have only one strap. Therefore, you should always follow the manufacturer’s instructions for the

model you are using. The manufacturer's instructions are found in or on the disposable respirator's packaging. Instructions for some disposable respirator models are also available on the NIOSH website. If you do not have the instructions that came with the disposable respirator, you should contact the manufacturer.

1. Choose the right size for your face.
2. If you have facial hair, shave your face first.
3. Put the respirator under your chin with the nose piece up.
4. Pull the top strap over your head.
5. Rest the top strap high at the top back (crown) of your head.
6. Pull the bottom strap over your head.
7. Rest the bottom strap around your neck, below your ears. If you have long hair, make sure the strap is under your hair, against your neck.
8. Make sure eyeglasses or other objects are not in the way of the straps or other parts of the respirator.
9. If there is a metal nose clip: Put your fingertips of both hands at the top of the nose clip. Then push inward while moving your fingertips down both sides of the nose clip. Do not pinch with one hand only.
10. Make sure there are no gaps between your skin and the respirator. If there are gaps, adjust the straps and nose clip again. If there are still gaps, you may need a different size or model.

### How do I know when to change a disposable respirator?

You should replace a disposable respirator with a new one when:

- it becomes soiled
- it may be contaminated with germs (like viruses, bacteria, and mold)
- it becomes damaged
- you find it is harder to breathe through than when you first put it on

### Where should I keep a disposable respirator when I am not using it?

You should keep new disposable respirators and disposable respirators that can be reused in a clean, dry place.

### Can anyone wear a disposable respirator?

People with some lung or heart diseases may have trouble breathing with a disposable respirator. If you have lung or heart disease, check with your doctor. Disposable respirators do not come in children's sizes, so they cannot be used by children.

**Author:** Kristin J. Cummings, MD, MPH

**Reviewers:** Suzanne C. Lareau, RN, MS and Marianna Sockrider, MD, DrPH

## Rx Action Steps

- ✓ The best protection from particles in the air is to avoid them.
- ✓ If you must be around particles in the air, find out if you should wear a disposable respirator. If you are not sure, ask your doctor or health department.
- ✓ Make sure a disposable respirator has the name "NIOSH" on it (or the equivalent certification, outside of the United States).
- ✓ Choose the right size disposable respirator for you. You may have to try several models until you find one that is right.
- ✓ Follow the manufacturer's instructions every time you put on a disposable respirator.
- ✓ Replace a disposable respirator when it becomes soiled, contaminated, damaged, or harder to breathe through.
- ✓ If you have lung or heart disease, check with your doctor before using a disposable respirator.
- ✓ If a disposable respirator is required in your workplace, make sure your employer offers a complete respiratory protection program. The program should include training, medical evaluation, and respirator fit testing.

**Healthcare Provider's Contact Number:**

---

## Additional Information

**Centers for Disease Control (CDC)**

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/respirators/>

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-133/pdfs/2010-133.pdf>

**Food and Drug Administration (FDA)**

[http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/](http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/GeneralHospitalDevicesandSupplies/PersonalProtectiveEquipment/ucm055977.htm)

[ProductsandMedicalProcedures/](http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/GeneralHospitalDevicesandSupplies/PersonalProtectiveEquipment/ucm055977.htm)

[GeneralHospitalDevicesandSupplies/](http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/GeneralHospitalDevicesandSupplies/PersonalProtectiveEquipment/ucm055977.htm)

[PersonalProtectiveEquipment/ucm055977.htm](http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/ProductsandMedicalProcedures/GeneralHospitalDevicesandSupplies/PersonalProtectiveEquipment/ucm055977.htm)

**National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)**

[http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp\\_part/](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/topics/respirators/disp_part/)

This information is a public service of the American Thoracic Society. The content is for educational purposes only. It should not be used as a substitute for the medical advice of one's healthcare provider.

