



Surgical masks are not respirators

Surgical masks and disposable respirators have a similar appearance and both provide a barrier that covers your nose and mouth. However, there is a great deal of difference in the protection they provide.



Surgical masks

A surgical mask **protects others** from the airborne droplets you produce. A surgical mask:

- Prevents you from spreading airborne droplets such as spit and mucous to others around you
- Does not seal tightly to your face and is not designed to filter particulates from the air you breathe
- May have a moisture barrier to reduce the risk that splashes of body fluids will reach your nose or mouth
- Is used to protect people around you
- Is NOT a respirator

An appropriate respirator must be worn when the need for one is identified by a risk assessment.

Disposable respirators

A disposable respirator **protects you** from breathing particulate hazards. A disposable respirator:

- Protects you from breathing in particulates, including infectious viruses and bacteria
- Seals tightly to your face so that inhaled air is drawn through the filter
- Requires a fit test to ensure that it fits properly
- Has a NIOSH rating printed on the mask (typically “N95”)
- Has two straps—one that fits behind your head, the other behind your neck—and may have an external exhalation valve

For more information, see the WorkSafeBC publications *Breathe Safer* and *Controlling Exposure: Protecting Workers from Infectious Diseases*.