

# Extending the Use of N95 Masks

Healthcare workers in all fields have reported difficulties sourcing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources are available to help dentists determine when and how to extend the use of N95 masks/respirators while maintaining appropriate infection control.

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The **National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)**, as part of its Pandemic Planning resources, has developed a comprehensive resource, [Recommended Guidance for Extended Use and Limited Reuse of N95 Filtering Facepiece Respirators in Healthcare Settings](#), to help dentists and other healthcare personnel assess the applicability of both options. **Masks can provide adequate protection for eight hours of continuous or intermittent use.**

## “Extended use” and “Reuse” are defined as follows:

- **Extended use** refers to continuous wear of the same N95 respirator, without removal between patients, when working on multiple patients.
- **Reuse** refers to wearing the same N95 mask, with removal between patients for a **maximum of five donnings, when working on multiple patients** (see “additional steps apply for N95 masks that will be reused,” below.)

## You must observe each of the following when reusing or extending the use of N95 masks:

- Conduct a user seal check after each donning.
- Discard any N95 mask contaminated by the patient.
- Discard N95 masks following close contact with patients exhibiting active signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or any other infectious disease.
- Discard any N95 mask that is damaged or difficult to breathe through.
- Consider using a face shield over the N95 masks.
- Perform hand hygiene before and after touching or adjusting the N95 mask.

## Additional steps apply for N95 masks that will be reused:

- Masks need to be hung in a designated storage area or kept in a clean, breathable container between uses.
- Stored masks should be organized in such a way that they do not touch one another.
- The user of the mask needs to be clearly identified (e.g., writing the user’s name on the straps).
- If the inside of the mask is touched, it needs to be discarded and hand hygiene performed.
- Clean, non-sterile gloves are to be worn when donning an N95 mask or performing a user seal check, after which the gloves are to be discarded.

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The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's** (CDC) [Summary for Healthcare Facilities: Strategies for Optimizing the Supply of N95 Respirators during the COVID-19 Response](#) provides conventional capacity strategies to be incorporated into everyday practices as well as contingency capacity strategies to assist during expected shortages.

The agency also offers a resource on [Decontamination and Reuse of Filtering Facepiece Respirators](#), which offers an additional reuse strategy for disposable N95 masks or filtering face piece respirators (FFR) and notes that:

- A worn N95 mask may be stored in a breathable paper bag for a minimum of five days and then used again.
- Be attentive when doffing the mask, and
- Ensure that the storage bag for each N95 mask is labeled with the user's name and every date worn to ensure the use is properly tracked.

In the **Food and Drug Administration's** [Personal Protective Equipment EAUs](#) (Emergency Use Authorization) the FDA offers guidance on reprocessing respirators (N95 masks), which covers such topics as:

- Vapor Phase Hydrogen Peroxide (VPHP) for single-user reuse by healthcare personnel in a healthcare setting. Examples of entities that provide this technology include [Battelle](#) and [Steris](#).

**Unsuitable methods for reprocessing** that destroy respirator integrity (OSHA also has a page that lists [processes not to use](#)):

- Autoclaving, microwaving, dry heat, ionizing radiation, disinfectant wipes, ethylene oxide, isopropyl alcohol, soap, and chlorine bleach.



## Additional resources include:

- The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) [Appendix A: Authorized Respirators \(updated April 24, 2020\)](#) which offers information on authorized manufacturers and products
- [FDA Emergency Use Authorization \(EUA\)](#)
- The ADA's [Understanding Mask Types](#) provides an easy-to-follow chart that compares masks, N95 respirators and respirators with EUA, including KN95, KP95, PFF2, P2, DS/DL2, KOREAN SPECIAL 1<sup>st</sup>
- The [ADA's Tips to Avoid Counterfeit Masks](#) provides the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (D) guidance to help healthcare professionals avoid buying counterfeit masks.

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