

Face Coverings & Equity

Please note this fact sheet was originally created June 10 and now a mandatory [face covering policy](#) is in effect in Dane County as of July 13, 2020. Please see our [face covering page](#) for more information.

Public Health Madison & Dane County *highly recommends* wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where physical distancing measures are difficult to maintain, however, they are not a replacement for physical distancing and other preventive measures, which should always be taken to ensure safety. Cloth face coverings are especially recommended in indoor settings, but are not recommended for children under 2 years of age, or anyone who has trouble breathing.

Reasons Some People May Be Unable to Wear Face Coverings

While cloth face coverings *can* prevent the wearer from spreading the virus, there are valid reasons that may prevent an individual from wearing a cloth face covering and **we do not recommend requiring or ordering individuals to wear cloth face coverings** outside of certain employment spaces.

Some health conditions may keep individuals from being able to wear a cloth face covering. These might include chronic conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer's, autism spectrum disorder, or COPD/emphysema; wearing a face covering may be challenging, dangerous, or stressful for individuals with disabilities.

In addition to medical considerations, individuals may not feel safe wearing a mask for many reasons including emotional, behavioral, and [trauma experiences](#). Individuals may also fear [racial profiling or discrimination](#) based on wearing – or not wearing – a face covering. Another reason why we do not recommend requiring or ordering face coverings is access to clean, multiple, or appropriate face coverings may vary based on socioeconomic status.

Unintended Consequences

Requiring cloth face coverings or masks to be worn by the public may lead to potentially problematic, albeit likely unintentional, consequences. Potential consequences of implementing mandatory masking may include:

- Loss of wages, if the employer does not consider reasons why masking may not be an option for that individual

- Limiting access to certain business spaces such as grocery access, which could lead to increased food insecurity
- Generally requiring individuals to choose [between their safety](#) or being able to access spaces that support their ability to access basic needs, as some examples.

Problems with Enforcement

Additional problematic consequences of requiring cloth face coverings to be worn in public relate to concerns surrounding enforcement. The enforcement of masking requirements have [resulted in violence](#) in other parts of the country, both [between police](#) and private citizens – this is most certainly not something that we want to see in Madison and Dane County. Using local law enforcement resources to enforce face covering requirements would detract from their ability to support other safety and public service roles.

Furthermore, enforcement efforts that include fines have resulted in financially penalizing individuals in a climate when many are already financially stretched. We know that any system that is [complaint-based will disproportionately penalize](#) those who are marginalized from systems of power. Any decision to require cloth face coverings should be done with consideration of these potential harms along with weighing the benefits related to transmission of the virus.

What Businesses Can Do

Based on what is best for their space, use, and community, the [Forward Dane plan](#) requires that all businesses unable to assure physical distancing must provide some type of protective shield between individuals or they must provide face coverings for employees. If a business or other public or private space decides to require or recommend that a cloth or disposable face covering be worn, they should provide them, free of cost, to both customers or space users and staff. It is also important that the business or organization make and advertise a plan for flexibility and accommodation for anyone who is unable to wear a face covering. The ADA requires businesses to provide reasonable accommodations to continue providing services to individuals unable to safely wear a face covering.

NOTES

This fact sheet was originally created June 10, 2020 and was previously called, *Why We Recommend, but Don't Require that People Wear Face Coverings*.

Effective July 13, 2020, [face coverings are required](#) in certain settings. As with all of our decisions, these orders are based on national guidance, current scientific research, and local data. We also know that all of our decisions come with unintended consequences.

There are two public health crises in our community—COVID-19 and racism—and they intersect. Asian people have been harassed for

wearing masks in public, while Black people have been perceived as a threat because they are wearing a mask. Incidents like this have already happened in Madison and Dane County. This is racism, and it is unacceptable.

These orders are not justification for people to harass, police, or harm individuals for wearing a mask or for not wearing a mask. These orders are for businesses to enforce mask wearing in their indoor spaces and for individuals to make changes to their own mask wearing practices.