

Cloth or Disposable – Mask Fit is Most Important

In the summer of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be easing, and mask mandates were lifted in many parts of the country. Now, however, with a record number of positive cases as the omicron variant sweeps across the nation, people are once again being asked to mask up in public, no matter their vaccination status.

This new wave of COVID cases and the highly contagious nature of the omicron variant has sparked concern about cloth masks, and whether they provide enough protection in public.

Lori Grooms is the director of Infection Prevention for OSF HealthCare. She says a rated mask is best at filtering the air. Rated masks have been approved by American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). Not only are they readily available, but they are also disposable, taking the burden of daily mask laundering off the table.

“A rated mask is going to filter out more than a cloth mask. That's not rocket science,” said Grooms. “We did know that in the beginning with COVID. We didn't have the mass manufacturing of masks like we do now, so we have masks more readily available.”

A cloth mask with multiple layers of fabric, however, is still effective at filtering droplets and particles. According to Grooms, a mask's ability to protect all comes down to a proper fit.

“It's more about the fit, making sure that it covers your nose, it comes under your chin, and it fits the sides of your cheeks to avoid those gaps,” she explained. “So if you have a well-fitted cloth mask, and you're comparing it to a looser-fitting disposable mask, that well-fitted cloth mask may be more protective.”

Despite their reusable nature, cloth masks do have a shelf life. Continued handling, washing and wearing can break down a cloth mask's fibers, allowing respiratory droplets either in or out.

“It's been about two years. We've been wearing these same masks for two years. It's time to probably either pitch them and get new, or hold them up to the light and see how much light you can see coming through. As you wash things or launder them, it shrinks the fibers. It makes the fibers loose so they aren't going to capture things as readily. So that may be time to get rid of them and get new,” said Grooms.

Recent headlines claim cloth masks alone won't cut it against the omicron variant, and two masks should be worn. Grooms explains that double masking is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), but mainly for when a disposable mask doesn't properly fit.

“If you have a well-fitting mask, it's not necessary,” she said. “The double masking really was to try to ensure that better fit. So the CDC has a recommendation that if you're wearing a disposable mask with gaps, you can put on a cloth mask that's going to give you that better fit.”

When shopping for a mask Grooms says there are multiple things to keep in mind. If you are looking at a cloth mask, make sure it has multiple layers. And while most disposable masks meet the need for protection, Grooms recommends reading the manufacturer information to see if it is ASTM approved. The ASTM rating should be listed on the package.

Above all, Grooms says we can all help slow the spread of the Covid virus by wearing a mask in public, ever time. Whether it's cloth or disposable, it provides an important level of protection. In addition to masking you can protect yourself and others by getting vaccinated and boosters as recommended as well as frequent hand hygiene.