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The CDC says healthcare workers who can't get a mask should use a bandana or scarf as a 'last resort' as supplies run short

Gabby Landsverk Mar 19, 2020, 12:43 PM



Emergency room nurse Kathy Nguyen wears a mask as deals with flu patients at Palomar Medical Center in Escondido, California, U.S., January 18, 2018. REUTERS/Mike Blake




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- **As the US fights to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus and cases continue to rise, healthcare workers on the front lines are facing an unprecedented shortage of medical supplies.**
- **With severe shortages of N95 face masks, which protect medical staff from infection by airborne particles, the CDC has updated its crisis capacity guidelines to suggest bandanas or scarves as "a last resort."**
- **There's no proof that homemade or improvised masks can protect against the virus, however, and such a recommendation is "alarming" and could be unsafe, according to an infectious diseases specialist.**
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As medical staff in the US face a rising number of COVID-19 cases with a dwindling supply of protective gear, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has updated its advice, suggesting that, in a crisis, healthcare workers could use bandana or scarves over their faces while treating patients, despite the fact that neither are proven to be effective.


In the [recently updated guidelines](#) for dealing with mask shortages, the CDC recommends that medical professionals "might use homemade masks (e.g., bandana, scarf) for care of patients with COVID-19 as a last resort" if other equipment is not available.

The recommendation is "alarming" to medical professionals because there's no evidence homemade masks can protect against the virus, according to Celine Gounder, epidemiologist and clinical assistant professor of medicine and infectious diseases at New York University.

"While wearing a scarf or bandana might help prevent a sick person from transmitting coronavirus infection to others by trapping respiratory droplets, it is unsafe for healthcare workers to rely on scarves and bandanas to protect themselves against infection by their patients," Gounder told Business Insider via email.

The CDC's own guidelines acknowledge that a bandana or scarf tied around the face still isn't considered personal protective equipment, noting that "their capability to protect [healthcare professionals] is unknown. Caution should be exercised when considering this option." The site also advises that workers should "ideally" use a full face shield in combination with a homemade mask.

All of the masks, explained

MASK	USE	DESCRIPTION	USUAL COST	WHO NEEDS FOR COVID-19
Homemade mask (reusable if washed) 	Recommended for everyone in the US by the CDC, for use in public places, like grocery stores.	Homemade masks can be sewn, cut, or fashioned from a bandana and coffee filter, per the CDC. The masks should be washed routinely.	Low cost	People in crowded places where it's difficult to maintain 6 feet of distance between yourself and others.

 Surgical mask (disposable)	Surgeons (mainly, so they don't get germs on their patients)	<p>Can help protect wearers from getting others sick through their spit.</p> <p>Doesn't protect healthy people from acquiring an illness, and a loose fit leaves room for error.</p>	\$0.25	Sick people (to avoid infecting others), and caretakers
 N95 respirator (disposable)	Working with dust, mold, or medical/ environmental emergencies. Only protects against particles, not gases or vapors.	Can help protect healthcare workers from germs by blocking out at least 95% of small airborne particles — if worn correctly.	\$2–\$4	Healthcare workers
 P100 respirator/ gas mask (reusable)	Painting/ woodworking, exposure to lead, asbestos, solvents and chemicals.	Protects manual laborers from exposure to lead, asbestos, solvents, and other dangerous chemicals on the job.	\$25–\$50	Effective for all, but unnecessary
 Full face respirator/ Powered air-purifying respirator (reusable)	Painting or scenarios where a person needs protection from gases and vapors. Protects the eyes.	Protects people from gases and vapors. Can be a better fit for people with breathing problems or robust facial hair.	Prices vary. Start around \$115 for basic models.	Could be for people who have a hard time breathing in a regular mask, as some are powered with an air supply.
 Self-contained breathing apparatus (reusable)	Firefighters	Protects people like firefighters who need clean air in dangerously polluted situations.	\$2,500–\$4,000	No one

National Nurses United (NNU), a professional association and union, previously pushed back against the loosening of protective equipment standards when the CDC suggested surgical masks could be used instead of the [more specialized N95 masks](#) to treat coronavirus cases.

"If nurses and health care workers aren't protected, that means patients and the public are not protected," NNU executive director Bonnie Castillo said in a [press release](#). "This is a major public health crisis of unknown proportions. Now is not the time to be weakening our standards and protections, or cutting corners. Now is the time we should be stepping up our efforts."

Health officials have reached out to the private sector in effort to resupply hospitals and medical staff

Amid the shortages, health organizations have considered partnering with private companies and donors to make more crucial medical equipment available to treat the growing number of coronavirus cases.

Chinese billionaire Jack Ma tweeted earlier this week that he would be shipping a million face masks to the US, along with COVID-19 testing kits.

And [Tesla's chief executive Elon Musk announced](#) his company would also begin producing respirators to help ease the deficit.

Gounder commented that this kind of public/private collaboration could be crucial to bridging the gap in supplies need to protect health workers during a critical time.

"We are at war against the coronavirus," she said. "In prior wars, we asked families to donate their wedding rings, jewelry, and other items to the war effort. We should be pleading with the public and corporations who are hoarding respirator masks to donate their N95 masks to those serving on the frontlines of this war."

Read more:

The US government sent out a shipment of expired face masks to [health workers. Here's how face masks can expire, and when they're still usable.](#)

[New York just opened its first drive-through coronavirus test facility at the site of a major outbreak](#)

[Holding your breath can't help you self-diagnose the coronavirus. Here's what you should do instead.](#)

The coronavirus pandemic

- [All the differences between COVID-19 vaccines, summarized in a simple table you can take to your vaccination appointment.](#)
- One chart shows [which vaccine side effects you can expect](#) based on your age, manufacturer, and dose.
- A [day-by-day breakdown of coronavirus symptoms](#) shows how COVID-19 goes from bad to worse.
- The [best and worst face masks](#), ranked by their level of protection.
- The [coronavirus is going to stick around forever](#). Get ready for the new normal.