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# Key Takeaways from OSHA's Guidance on Masks, Face Coverings, and Respirators

## Background

As many businesses begin to reopen, workers are being asked to wear a face mask or face covering in order to provide a safer work environment. This raises many questions since wearing masks in the workplace is new for many of us. The US Department of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has recently published guidance to help employers navigate these new protocols, as not all face protection is created equal, and state regulations for reopening vary widely.

## Summary

On June 10, 2020, OSHA published a series of frequently asked questions and answers (FAQs) regarding the use of cloth face coverings, surgical masks, and respirators in the workplace. These [FAQs](#) are meant to help employers address OSHA's guidance for putting in place protective measures during COVID-19.

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The FAQs offer clarity around key questions such as the difference between cloth face coverings, surgical masks, and respirators. Here are some other clarifications included in the FAQs:

- Cloth face coverings are not considered personal protective equipment (PPE) and employers are not required to provide them;
- OSHA generally recommends that employers encourage workers to wear face coverings at work, but employers ultimately make the determination;
- Cloth face coverings are not a substitute for social distancing measures, as they are intended to prevent individuals who are unaware they have COVID-19 (because they are asymptomatic or presymptomatic) from spreading potentially infectious respiratory droplets to others;
- Where cloth face coverings are not appropriate, employers can provide face shields and/or surgical masks instead;
- OSHA suggests following CDC recommendations, and always washing or discarding cloth face coverings that are visibly soiled; and
- Employers must not use surgical masks or cloth face coverings when respirators are needed.

Guidelines evolve rapidly, and the answers to what appear to be common questions these days are not always clear. These OSHA FAQs are only intended to help businesses maintain a healthy and safe workplace, but the guidance is not legally binding. The future of work has changed as we know it, and it will now involve face masks to help curtail COVID-19. OSHA encourages employers to continue focusing on physical distancing measures even when workers are wearing cloth face coverings and recommends following CDC's guidance on washing face coverings.

## Employer Next Steps

- Employers should review OSHA's guidance to ensure they are correctly balancing any state or local requirements with their need to protect the health and safety of their employees.
- Employers should provide policies and signage on their specific requirements with regards to social distancing and face coverings. HR Knowledge has signage you can download in our [COVID-19 Workplace Poster Center](#).
- Consider downloading our [Return-to-Work Toolkit](#) which includes model policies on face coverings.
- If you are a Full-Service or Virtual HR client and have questions, [email us](#).

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