

Surgical masks are not respirators, July 2009



Surgical masks and disposable respirators have a similar appearance and both provide a barrier that covers your nose and mouth; however, there is a great deal of difference in the protection they provide.

Respirators

A disposable respirator **protects you** from breathing particulate hazards including airborne viruses and bacteria.



A disposable respirator:

- Protects you from breathing in particulates, including infectious viruses and bacteria
- Seals tightly to your face so that inhaled air is drawn through the filter
- Requires a “fit test” to ensure that it will seal properly to your face
- Has a NIOSH rating printed on the mask (typically “N95”)
- Has two straps – one that fits behind the head, the other behind the neck – and may have an external exhalation valve

Surgical masks

A surgical mask **protects others** from the airborne droplets you produce



A surgical mask:

- Prevents you from spreading airborne droplets (e.g., spit and mucus) to others around you
- Does not seal tightly to your face, and is not designed to filter particulates from the air you breathe
- May have a moisture barrier to reduce the risk that splashes of body fluids will reach your nose or mouth
- Is used to protect people around you
- Is NOT a respirator

An appropriate respirator must be worn when required by a risk assessment. For more information, see the WorkSafeBC publications *Breathe Safer* and *Controlling Exposure: Protecting Workers from Infectious Diseases*.



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