

# RISK SIMPLIFIED

## RESOURCES

[Appendix D to Section 5144  
§5144.Respiratory Protection  
Cal/OSHA: Respirator Vendor List  
Interim Infection Prevention and  
Control](#)  
[CDC: NIOSH-approved N95  
Respirators List](#)  
[Medical Health Operational Area  
Coordination \(MHOAC\)](#)

## QUESTIONS

[Email PRISM Risk Control](#)  
or call 916.850.7300

## Face Covering or Respirator? Know the Difference

by John Nichols

The terms mask, face covering, and respirator are often used interchangeably, however there are some important differences which may significantly impact worker safety. Mask is a general term commonly applied to both face coverings and respirators, even though these two devices have very different capabilities and intended uses, e.g., face coverings are source control devices and respirators are personal protective equipment (PPE).



Face Coverings



Filtering Facepiece Respirator

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Healthcare settings routinely utilize face coverings to limit exposure to respiratory droplets and aerosolized particles. However, face coverings are not respirators, they are primarily source control devices, meaning they help prevent the wearer from spreading viruses to others via their respiratory emissions and should be used in accordance with CDC recommendations on Interim Infection Prevention and Control. Conversely, respirators are PPE certified by NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) to provide certain filtration efficiency levels, and are intended to protect the user (individual wearing the respirator) by reducing their exposure to airborne particles.

Some face covering manufacturers have designed their products to mimic respirators, and in doing so misrepresent the capabilities of these devices. The respirator like design and description of these face coverings imply they have the same filtration efficiencies as respirators (such as N95 and KN95 filtering facepiece respirators) when they do not. This type of misleading marketing has caused confusion and could result in harm to those who unknowingly wear a face covering when expecting the protection of a respirator.

## Examples of Face Coverings Designed to Mimic Respirators



Below are a few ways to distinguish a filtering facepiece respirator from a face covering. Respirators have all of the following characteristics:

- Rigid/moldable nose piece
- NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) efficiency rating and certification label on the respirator or respirator packaging
- Dual straps (headbands) that are placed at back of user's head to create a tight seal between respirator and user's face – Ear loops are NOT straps.

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## Comparison: Face Covering and Filtering Facepiece Respirator



	Face Covering	Filtering Facepiece Respirator
Testing & Approval	None	Evaluated, tested, and approved by NIOSH
Intended Use	Protects others from the wearer's respiratory emissions	Reduce wearer's exposure to particles
Respirator	No	Yes
Face Seal Fit	Loose-fitting	Tight-fitting
Fit Testing	No	Yes
User Seal Check	No	Yes, required each time the respirator is donned (put on)
Filtration	Does NOT provide wearer with protection from airborne particles	Filters out at least 95% of airborne particles
Leakage	Leakage occurs around the edge of the mask when user inhales	When properly fitted, minimal leakage occurs around edges of the respirator when user inhales

Employers and the general public should be aware many reputable retailers are selling face coverings manufactured to look like filtering facepiece respirators, and some even include counterfeit labels and certifications. Due diligence must be exercised when purchasing respirators to ensure legitimately certified and effective devices are acquired. Cal/OSHA has developed a list of vendors who report available supplies of NIOSH approved N95 respirators, as well as government stockpiles that may be available through local Medical Health Operational Area Coordination (MHOAC) programs. Additionally, the CDC's (Center for Disease Control) has a list of NIOSH-approved N95 Particulate Filtering Facepiece Respirators. For questions or additional information pertaining to face coverings or respirators, please contact the [PRISM Risk Control Department](#).