

News

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Health Officer Directs Health Care Personnel to Wear Masks during Respiratory Virus Season

Redwood City – San Mateo County Health Officer Dr. Kismet Baldwin-Santana today issued a local health order requiring staff in patient care areas of health care facilities to wear face masks.

Effective at 12:01 a.m. on Nov. 1, 2023, the order applies to paid and unpaid facility personnel and other professionals and does not apply to patients, visitors or individuals with medical or mental health conditions or a disability that prevents wearing a mask.

Annually, between late fall and spring, San Mateo County data show higher rates of COVID-19, influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and other viral infections that can cause severe respiratory disease. This seasonal increase in circulation of multiple respiratory viruses presents a particular risk – including severe disease and death – to infants, older adults and people with impaired immune systems.

“Well fitted masks worn by health care personnel reduce both the risk of infection for these workers and the risk of transmitting respiratory viruses to patients and residents,” Baldwin-Santana said. “Masks are essential in patient care areas when seasonal risk of exposure to one or multiple viruses is at its highest.”

Health care facilities under the order include hospitals, dialysis centers, infusion centers, skilled nursing facilities and portions of long-term care facilities where nursing care is provided.

Within those facilities, the order applies to patient care areas, such as lobbies, waiting rooms, examination rooms, patient wings, elevators and hallways used by patients. It does not apply to administrative offices or staff break areas that are only accessible to facility personnel or to cafeterias or gift shops that are not used for the provision of health care.

Similarly, the order does not apply to outpatient facilities such as doctors’ and dentists’ offices and other clinics that do not provide in-patient care. While they are not required in these settings, the health officer strongly encourages outpatient caregivers to wear face masks in the patient areas of their facilities.

Under the order, “face mask” means a surgical mask, KN95, KF94, or N95 that is well-fitted to an individual and covers the nose and mouth. A scarf, ski mask, balaclava, bandana, turtleneck, collar, cloth mask, or any mask that has an unfiltered one-way exhaust valve does not qualify.

Respiratory virus season runs from Nov. 1 to April 30, though the health officer may adjust the dates of the order based on respiratory virus surveillance data.

The full text of the order is [available here](#).

County Health [urges residents six months and older](#) to get the seasonal flu vaccine and the updated COVID-19 shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends getting the flu and COVID vaccines at the same time.

Vaccines are available from health care providers and local pharmacies at no cost for those with insurance. Many pharmacies offer free COVID-19 to residents without insurance – call or check pharmacy websites to learn more.

Residents without health coverage may also contact County Health at 650-573-2877 or send an email to SMCHHealth_IZ@smcgov.org to learn how to access flu and COVID-19 vaccines at no cost.

To find flu and COVID-19 vaccines near you, visit [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov), then call or visit provider websites to make an appointment.

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