

Is it safe for a child to wear a mask? Your questions answered

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The responses to Gov. Kate Brown's mask mandate for schools issued last month have been varied. Some parents and school districts have spoken out against the rule and others, including medical groups like the Oregon Pediatric Association, have praised it.

As students and families prepare for a new school year, pediatricians answer some frequently asked questions about mask wearing and how to keep children and those around them safe from COVID-19.

Are children susceptible to COVID-19?

Yes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, more than 1.8 million children in the U.S. younger than 12 have contracted COVID-19, making up a little more than 6% of all cases, CDC data shows. More than 12,000 children younger than 9 in Oregon have gotten COVID-19, according to Oregon Health Authority data.

However, pediatricians are seeing more COVID-19 cases in children, said Dr. Serena Black, a pediatrician with PeaceHealth Medical Group. They're also seeing more hospitalizations and serious cases, she said.

With the new highly transmissible delta variant of the virus, health professionals are urging people who are eligible for the vaccine to get it to slow the mutations and spread, and protect those (like young children) who cannot.

Children age 12 and older are approved to get the vaccines.

Are masks still effective for children?

Yes. When masks are worn correctly (covering the nose and mouth, with a good fit on the sides), they create a barrier that reduces the spray of spit and respiratory droplets that can carry the virus, preventing spread between people.

"Masks are important for children for multiple reasons," Black said. "Children under 12 are still not eligible for vaccines and therefore masks and hand hygiene are the best ways to keep them safe from infection (not only from COVID-19 but also other respiratory infections like influenza).

"It is also important for children to wear masks to help minimize community spread of respiratory infections as children are classically a population that is likely to get sick and spread respiratory viruses to others."

Can wearing a mask make it harder for my child to breathe?

No. Some parents have been worried face masks will reduce oxygen intake and could lead to low blood oxygen levels, known as hypoxemia, the American Academy of Pediatrics said.

Masks are made from breathable materials that will not block the oxygen your child needs. Masks will not affect your child's ability to focus or learn in school, AAP stated.



First Graders Alex Albin, left, and Tyler Custodio wear masks in Amanda McCoy's first-grade class at the newly-rebuilt Addison Mizner School in Boca Raton, Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2021. Palm Beach County Schools opened the school year with a masking requirement with an opt-out option. JOE CAVARETTA, AP

"There is no evidence that wearing masks has any detrimental effects on children's health or development," Black said.

"In fact, we have seen children throughout the pandemic very successfully embrace mask wearing as a way to keep themselves and others safe. The exception would be for children under 2 years old who cannot safely wear masks and are also unlikely to be able to successfully keep them in place."

The vast majority of children 2 or older can safely wear face masks for extended periods of time, such as the school day or at child care. This includes children with many medical conditions.

Will my child be at risk of poor lung development?

No. Pediatricians and doctors continue to debunk this rumor.

Cloth masks are made from breathable material and oxygen flows through and around the mask, while blocking spray of spit that may contain the virus, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Keeping your child's lungs healthy is important, AAP said, which includes preventing infections like COVID-19.

Can carbon dioxide get trapped in the mask and poison my child?

No. This is another myth health officials and pediatricians have debunked.

Rumors of people getting carbon dioxide poisoning, or hypercapnia, from exhaling into the mask and then inhaling are also untrue, the AAP states.

Carbon dioxide molecules are so

small they cannot be trapped by breathable materials like cloth masks —which is why doctors can wear masks for long periods of time without issue.

Can masks lead to a weaker immune system by putting the body under stress?

No. Wearing a face mask does not weaken your immune system or increase your chances of getting sick if exposed to the COVID-19 virus, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Wearing a mask, even if you do not have symptoms of COVID-19, helps prevent the virus from spreading.

What are some ways parents can prepare children to be comfortable with masking?

There are many ways to make wearing a mask more comfortable or normal for children, pediatricians say.

Let children pick out their own color or pattern of mask and turn it into something fun and comfortable for them to wear. Adults should also be a good example and wear masks themselves, and explain why people need to in simple terms.

"I recommend that parents talk with their children about masks openly as a way to keep themselves and others safe from germs," Black said.

She said it could also help to explain that masks are one way to help people safely go to activities like going to school or an outdoor sports game.

Black also recommends practicing wearing the mask at home for periods of time, so kids get used to the feeling

they'll have once back in class.

Dr. Elizabeth Super, a pediatrician at Oregon Health & Science University's Doernbecher Children's Hospital, gives these tips for "Helping Your Hesitant Child Mask Up" as a pediatrician and a parent of two school-age children:

- **Encourage:** The more you wear the mask, the better!

- **Model:** Put masks on your children's teddy bears and draw pictures with masks. Point out celebrities and athletes who are wearing masks if you are watching television together.

- **Positive Reinforcement:** Reward for mask time ON, not for the mask being off.

- **Routine:** Make masking part of your routine. Try out different masks. Some children prefer different textures. Have children pick out fabrics to sew homemade masks.

- **Storytelling:** "Other heroes wear masks, too! Firefighters, pilots and doctors wear masks. Now you can be a hero and wear a mask, too."

Where can I learn more?

AAP encourages parents and guardians to talk with the child's pediatrician about concerns or questions about children wearing masks.

The Oregon Pediatric Society has a website with resources specifically about kids and masking: <https://oregonpediatricsociety.org/resources/kidmaskup/>

Contact reporter Jordyn Brown at jbrown@registerguard.com or 541-246-4264, and follow her on Twitter @thejordynbrown and Instagram @registerguard.

Now's the time to plan industrious protective crops

Kym Pokorny

Oregon State University Extension

CORVALLIS – No one wants to think of harvest's end as the vegetable garden reaches peak, but now's the time to plan for cover crops to be planted in fall.

Cover crops, also called green manure, include grains like winter oats and cereal rye. Legumes, such as commonly used crimson clover, Austrian field pea and common vetch, are nitrogen "fixers." Beneficial bacteria in legume root nodules take nitrogen from the air and supply it to the plant. When the cover crop decomposes, some of the nitrogen becomes available to other plants.

If you're not acquainted with cover crops, here's the rundown: These hardworking plants can add organic matter and aerate the soil, protect it from compaction caused by rain, suppress weeds and reduce erosion, according to Nick Andrews, organic vegetable advisor for Oregon State University Extension Service. As a bonus, their blooms provide nectar and pollen for pollinators and other beneficial insects.

Not a bad deal for an almost no-maintenance plant. All that's needed is to seed it in, water a couple of times until the rains start, leave it through winter and dig or till it in spring. However, timing is key. Plant seeds of overwintering cover crops by September or early October so they get established before the weather turns cold and wet.

Make sure when you plant that the seed has good contact with the soil. Larger seeds like peas, vetch and cereals should be raked in lightly. Mix small seeds with sand to make them easier to broadcast and then use a sprinkler to water in. If the weather is still dry, keep the area irrigated.

It's also important that plants are cut or mown down in spring before they set seed. In our climate, most gardeners incorporate cover crop residue to promote decomposition. Do this about four weeks before planting vegetables so the crop decomposes well, otherwise it can promote some soil-borne diseases and attract some insect pests. If you don't have four weeks for the cover crop to decompose, you can remove the stems and leaves and apply them somewhere else as a mulch or compost them. For vegetables you're harvesting after early October, consider inter-seeding during the summer.

"It all depends on when you need to get your vegetables in," Andrews said. "It's best to let cover crops decompose before you plant, especially for vegetables that you start from seed."

When it comes time to incorporate the cover crop, till shorter plants right into the soil. If the plant is too tall to turn under easily, mow first or use a weed trimmer. Tough-stemmed plants can be cut and left to decompose above ground. Or you can put the tops in the compost pile and dig in the roots. No matter the method, let the turned-under material sit until it's time to plant.

For beginners, Andrews advises:

Start with a cover crop that is easy to grow and manage. For example, crimson clover and phacelia are relatively easy to incorporate into the soil.

Be sure to prepare your field well and have sprinklers available if the weather is dry. It's a good idea to water the soil a bit before preparing the seedbed if the soil is very dry.

The first time you try cover crops, plant them in an area of your garden that you can leave for vegetables typically planted in late spring or early summer. This will buy you time to learn how to manage the cover crop residues in spring.

After you have successfully used one cover crop, try another in a different area of your garden. Then when you gain experience, experiment with mixtures, reduced tillage and other innovative practices.

Consider inter-seeding cover crops during the summer into late-harvested crops like sweet corn, winter squash and tomatoes.

For more information, refer to these publications:

"Cover Crops for Home Gardeners East of the Cascades and West of the Cascades" and "Methods for Successful Cover Crop Management for Gardeners," publications by Washington State University that Andrews collaborated on.

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