My employees have to wear mouth masks. What do I need to take particular care of?

The Ministerial Decree (MD) of 30 April (see [www.agoria.be/nl/Versoepelingen-van-de-corona-maatregelen-vanaf-4-mei-gepubliceerd](https://www.agoria.be/nl/Versoepelingen-van-de-corona-maatregelen-vanaf-4-mei-gepubliceerd)) refers expressly to the [generic guide](https://www.agoria.be/nl/Versoepelingen-van-de-corona-maatregelen-vanaf-4-mei-gepubliceerd) to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at work. Companies that follow the measures in this guide strictly have been able to restart their activities since 4 May. A very important element is the maximum application of the social distancing rules. What if the 1.5m distance rule cannot be complied with however? Wearing a mouth mask may then be necessary as an additional measure. The generic guide sets this out as follows:

In situations where the 1.5m cannot be complied with and after the organizational measures and collective protective equipment have been exhausted, wearing mouth masks may be necessary as an additional measure, in conjunction with other preventive measures and with respect for the prevention hierarchy. Moreover, to be effective, these masks must be worn and taken off correctly.

If the risk analysis shows that your employees have to wear mouth masks, these FAQs will help you to implement this measure in a correct and practical way.

**How do I find a reliable supplier?**

Do you already have a supplier of personal protective equipment (PPE)? Then contact him and ask whether he can supply you with mouth masks. However, it is possible that your regular supplier does not have masks in stock or does not yet offer these products in his range.

If you do not have a regular PPE supplier or if your regular PPE supplier cannot supply masks, you will have to look for a reliable partner. The members of [Febelsafe](https://www.febelsafe.eu) (the Belgian federation of manufacturers, distributors, service providers and professional end-users for safety and well-being) are a possible place to start. Several members supply PPE and have the necessary technical knowledge in house.

The market is currently flooded with suppliers of various types of mouth masks, but unfortunately not all of them are in good faith. Checking the reliability of these suppliers is not self-evident. You can nonetheless already get an idea of the reliability and possible quality of the mouth masks based on the information provided by the supplier.

**What should I pay attention to when buying mouth masks?**

As an employer, you are responsible for providing the necessary protective equipment for your employees. If it turns out that the 1.5 metre distance cannot be maintained, the employer can impose mouth masks. But what requirements do these mouth masks have to meet? The following documents can be of help:


The Belgian technical document draws a distinction between different types of mouth masks:

- Artisanal or so-called comfort masks;
- Community masks;
- Medical/surgical mouth masks;
Personal respiratory protective equipment (inter alia, FFP2 and FFP3)

Wearing FFP2 or FFP3 is currently reserved for personnel in the care sector or for workers exposed to specific risks, such as dust or hazardous products. Wearing surgical masks is reserved for specific individuals. This is explained in the document ‘Consensus over het rationeel en correct gebruik van mondmasks tijdens de Covid-19-pandemie’ [Consensus on the rational and correct use of mouth masks in the COVID-19 pandemic].

The technical document describes the design and minimum requirements that have to be followed for community and artisanal masks:

- **Community masks**: the effectiveness of these masks must be demonstrable. This can be done in 2 ways:
  - By means of a test report from the raw material supplier;
  - By carrying out or having the tests that are mentioned in the technical document carried out;
- **Artisanal masks**: these must be as effective as possible.

Community and artisanal masks do not have to comply with the specific standards for medical masks (EN 14683:2019) or for personal respiratory equipment (EN149:2001+A1:2009). Masks that comply with these standards bear the CE marking. A notified body hereby certifies that the entire mask meets the requirements of the standard.

You can include specific requirements in the order form (e.g. CE marking, a rigid bendable nose strip). Please ask the internal and/or external service for prevention and protection at work for advice.

**How can I check the quality of a mask or PPE?**

It is important to have an overview of the quality of a mouth mask already before ordering. Not all suppliers are equally reliable or have sufficient technical knowledge.

How can you get an idea of the quality of the different masks in advance?

- **Artisanal mouth masks**: The only condition is that they must be as effective as possible. You can nonetheless request a test report on the raw material if necessary;
- **Community masks**: request a test report on the raw material and/or a certificate that the masks comply with the Belgian technical document (NBN/DTD S 65-001:2020);
- **Medical or surgical masks** must bear the CE marking. Several false certificates are nonetheless circulating on the market. A first possible check, albeit on paper, is to verify that the CE certificate that must be present with such masks is correct. This must have been issued by a notified body accredited to certify such a mask. You can check for yourself whether the notified body mentioned on the CE certificate is authorized to certify these medical masks. An overview of the notified bodies for medical devices can be consulted via the following link: [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/nando/index.cfm?fuseaction=directive.notifiedbody&dir_id=13](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/nando/index.cfm?fuseaction=directive.notifiedbody&dir_id=13)

Additional information on offering medical masks and false certificates is provided on: [www.fagg.be/sites/default/files/content/info_aanbieden_chirurgische_masks_1.pdf](http://www.fagg.be/sites/default/files/content/info_aanbieden_chirurgische_masks_1.pdf)

- **Personal respiratory protective equipment** (inter alia FFP2 and FFP3) must bear the CE marking. As is the case with medical masks, a notified body must be involved in the certification process. You can check for yourself whether this notified body is accredited for this purpose. An overview of these

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2 If no test report or certificate can be produced, the mask has to be considered as being an artisanal or comfort mask.
The notified body must be specifically accredited for the certification of respiratory protective masks. For example, a notified body may be accredited for another type of PPE, but not necessarily for respiratory protection.

More information on false certificates of respiratory protective masks is posted on: www.febelsafe.be/nl/covid19/4089-verdachte-certificaten

Which questions can you ask your supplier?

- What are the specifications for the mask?
- Is it an artisanal or community mask?
- Is it a medical mask or respiratory protective mask with CE marking?
- In the case of a medical or respiratory protective mask: is there a CE certificate?
- Which notified body is involved in the CE certification?
- Is it possible to obtain a number of samples?
- ...

After delivery, it is advisable to check the quality of a number of masks in order to ascertain whether they are compliant with the agreements made.

Spray the fabric of the mask with a nebulizer (water) under pressure to test whether water penetrates through the masks.

**What about imported masks?**

Medical masks and personal respiratory protective equipment that have been imported must bear the CE marking. Masks that are imported as community masks must also meet the minimum requirements of the technical report. If you are an importer of masks from outside Europe yourself, it is your responsibility to ensure that they meet the standards. There are no specific import requirements for artisanal masks.

So be very careful when buying mouth masks directly from outside Europe.

**What about reusable masks?**

Reusable masks are also available on the market to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Artisanal masks and community masks are often reusable masks. A number of important points have to be considered with this type of masks in order to make sure that they are effective.

The minimum requirements for reuse for community masks are clearly set out in the Belgian technical document. The maintenance instructions should be provided when the masks are delivered. A temperature of at least 60°C must be maintained for 30 min. during washing for disinfection purposes. After washing, a visual check should be carried out for wear, impaired connection, deformation, etc. It is advisable to follow these maintenance instructions for artisanal masks. Since ordinary household washing machines cannot always guarantee a minimum temperature of 60°C for a sufficient length of time, a boil-wash programme (90°C) should be used.³

If you have these mouth masks washed by a third party, make sure that the maintenance instructions are contractually defined.

³ Source: Belgian technical document NBN/DTD S 65-001:2020
You must have a maintenance procedure for reusable mouth masks. To this end, you can rely on the supplier's instructions or the maintenance instructions in the technical document. Consider a suitable way to collect the reusable masks (e.g. in a closed container) and to distribute them again to the employees after cleaning. If it is agreed that employees are to wash their masks at home, provide clear instructions.

**What information and training should I give to employees?**

It is essential to provide employees with information and training on how to use and maintain mouth masks.

Employees should be provided with the following information in the very least:

- When should I wear a mask?
- How should I wear the mask?
- How should I take off the mask?
- If the employee washes the mask himself: How should I maintain my mouth mask?
- What should I do if a mouth mask is damaged?

**When should I wear a mask?**

Whether a mouth mask should be worn is based on a risk analysis. The rules regarding social distancing should always be applied to the maximum. Only where this is not possible and after all organizational and collective prevention measures have been exhausted, can wearing a mouth mask be an additional measure.

The starting point is the generic guide. Is wearing a mouth mask not necessary after all? Make clear why, when and for how long a mouth mask should be worn based on your risk analysis.

A mouth mask should be replaced at least every 8 hours or every 4 hours in case of intensive use or when it gets wet or visibly dirty.⁴ Reusable mouth masks should be washed after each use according to the specified maintenance instructions (see 'What about reusable masks?'). Disposable masks should be collected in closed containers.

An efficient use of mouth masks is essential as the stock is limited in many cases. This can be achieved by communicating all instructions clearly, but also by monitoring whether they are actually followed.

**How should I wear, put on and take off the mask?**

It is necessary to draw up very clear instructions on how to wear, put on and take off masks. Make sure that your employees are trained on these instructions. Use demo clips if necessary. Post the instructions, at least in the places where the mouth mask has to be put on and taken off. Make sure that the place where the mouth masks are put on and taken off has the necessary facilities for employees to wash or disinfect their hands. Also provide closed containers with a plastic bag where the removed mouth masks can be disposed of or closed containers where reusable masks can be collected. It is important to open these containers without touching them with your hands. Refer to the generic guide for additional recommendations.

**How to put on the mask**⁵

1. Wash your hands with soap and water before you touch the mask;

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⁴ Source: [https://www.info-coronavirus.be/nl/faq/#014](https://www.info-coronavirus.be/nl/faq/#014)

⁵ Source: NBN/DTD 565-001:2020
2) Check the mask to make sure there are no holes or cracks in it - if it is damaged, it should not be worn anymore but should be disposed of in a suitable container;
3) Hold the mask with the rigid bendable strip\(^6\) and the coloured side facing outwards;
4) Put on the mask according to the type you are using:
   a) Face mask with ear loops: hold both ear loops, stretch them carefully and hook them behind the ears so that the mask covers your nose, mouth and chin;
   b) Face mask with ribbons/ elastic bands: pull the lower ribbon/band over your head, then the upper ribbon/band, and adjust the mask so that it covers your nose, mouth and chin;
5) Shape or squeeze the nose bridge to adjust it to the shape of your nose.

How to take off the mask\(^7\)

1) Wash your hands with soap and water before you touch the mask;
2) Do not touch the front of the mask as it may be contaminated. Touch only the ear loops / ribbons / bands;
3) Remove the mask according to the type of you are using
   a) Face mask with ear loops: hold both ear loops, loosen and lift them gently to remove the mask;
   b) Face mask with ribbons/ elastic bands: Lift the lower ribbon/band over your head and then pull the upper ribbon/band over your head without touching the front of the mask.
4) Throw the mask in a closed laundry basket if it is washable, or in a closed waste bin for disposal;
5) Wash your hands with soap and water before you touch anything else.

How to maintain the mask\(^8\)

If the reusable mouth mask is washed by the worker, provide the necessary maintenance instructions from the manufacturer:

- do not use any specific products other than the neutral detergent, preferably without fabric softener;
- always wash masks separately with added ballast (e.g. an old bath towel) so as to be able to generate mechanical cleaning action;
- A temperature of at least 60 °C for 30 minutes must be maintained during washing. Since some household washing machines cannot guarantee this at a washing programme of 60 °C, the boil-wash programme (highest temperature) is recommended.

If damage to the mask (reduced connection, deformation, wear, etc.) is detected after washing, it should not be used.

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\(^6\) Artisanal masks do not necessarily have a strip. A nose strip will nonetheless make the mouth mask fit better. If you, as an employer, place an order, it is advisable to stipulate a rigid bendable strip in the requirements on the order form.

\(^7\) Source: NBN/DTS S65-001:2020

\(^8\) Source: NBN/DTS S65-001:2020
Used or damaged mask

If a mask is damaged during the visual inspection, it should be discarded. If a community or artisanal mask is damaged or at the end of its service life, it can be disposed of with normal waste after washing. Non-washable and/or non-reusable masks should be disposed of in a closed plastic bag packed in a closed waste bin. If a waste bin for medical waste is available, an unwashed and/or non-reusable mask can be thrown into it. In any event, please notify your waste collector.