SafeCare BC

Masks and Respirators: What's the Difference?

Surgical Mask

N95 Respirator

	Surgical Mask	N95 Respirator
Testing and Approval	ASTM (American Society of Testing and Materials) F2100 (Level 1, 2 and 3)	Must be NIOSH and CSA Standard certified to use in BC*
Intended Use and Purpose	Protects the wearer against large droplets, splashes, or sprays (e.g. bodily fluids). Protects others from the wearer's exhaled droplets.	Protects the wearer from exposure to particles, including small particles travelling through the air and large droplets. Should be used for specific medical procedures which are aerosol-generating.
Fit on Face	Loose-fitting.	Tight-fitting.
Seal and Fit-testing	No fit-testing needed since the mask does not need to form a tight seal. Leakage occurs around the edge of the mask when user inhales.	Wearer must be fit tested and the seal should be checked every time the wearer puts the respirator on. When properly fitted, minimal leakage occurs when user inhales.
Filtration	Does **NOT** provide the wearer with a reliable level of protection from inhaling smaller particles.	Filters out at least 95% of airborne particles including both large and small particles.
When to Discard	Disposable. Should be thrown out after use.	Should be thrown out at the end of each shift or if it becomes damaged, wet or soiled. Should also be thrown out if it no longer forms a seal on the wearer's face, or if breathing becomes difficult.

The Grey Area

There can be some risks associated with procuring acceptable masks, respirators and equivalents during a supply shortage. For example:

- **KN95 masks** are not held to the same regulatory standards as N95 masks and do not provide the same respiratory protection. However, they can provide more protection than surgical masks if they can be properly fit-tested and form an effective seal.
- **Ear Loops** designs, as opposed to around-the-head elastic, can make it more difficult to get an effective seal on a mask
- **Valves** are featured on some N95 respirators. These masks protect the wearer but not the patient or client. For this reason they are more commonly used in construction or other dusty environments, rather than healthcare settings.

* See WorkSafeBC Guidelines section 8.33(2) for further details

Credit: Centre for Disease Control and NIOSH Infographic