

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY



Wearing N95 masks at work: what healthcare workers experience and why many struggle to use them consistently

Summary

N95 respirators give the best protection against airborne infections. But they can be uncomfortable to wear for long periods. We wanted to know how this affects whether healthcare workers wear them — and what can help.

Why did we do this study?

Nurses, doctors, and dentists often need to wear N95 respirators at work. An N95 respirator is a tight-fitting mask that blocks at least 95 out of 100 tiny particles in the air — including viruses and bacteria. Similar masks — such as FFP2 or KN95 — offer the same protection.

Wearing an N95 respirator can be uncomfortable. Many workers find it hard to wear one for a long time. If a mask is too uncomfortable, will workers wear it regularly? And if not, does it still protect them?

We wanted to understand what the research says about how well healthcare workers accept N95 respirators, what physical and mental effects they cause, and what makes workers more or less likely to wear them.

How did we do it?

We looked at 31 existing research summaries published between 2020 and 2025. We rated the quality of each one. This type of study is called an overview of reviews.

What did we find?

Main findings are:

- N95 respirators are much harder to wear than surgical masks. More workers kept wearing surgical masks than N95 respirators.
- Half of N95 respirator users reported headaches.
- Skin problems affected up to 97 out of 100 frontline workers during COVID-19.
- Headaches started after 4 hours of wear. Skin damage appeared after 6 hours.
- After 8 hours, stress went up, focus went down, and it got harder to talk to patients.
- The longer workers wore N95 respirators without a break, the harder it was to keep going — no matter which virus they were working with.
- Workers with past experience wearing protective masks adjusted more easily.

Most research summaries had gaps in their methods. The exact numbers may not be perfect. But the results were similar across all reviews.

What does this mean?

Most healthcare workers want to wear N95 respirators — they know the masks protect them. The problem is that the respirators are hard to wear for a long time. Better mask design, regular rest breaks, proper fit testing, and strong workplace support programs are the most important steps to help workers use N95 respirators safely and consistently.

More research is needed on new, more comfortable respirator designs and on which workplace programs and policies best support safe and consistent N95 use.