

Men'sHealth

The 4 Best Face Masks for the Omicron Variant, According to a Doctor

Emilia Benton | March 21, 2022



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We're more than two years into the Covid-19 pandemic at this point, and despite the fact that mask guidelines have been relaxed virtually everywhere across the country, the disease is still raging, especially when it comes to the extra-contagious Omicron variant.

The good news about Omicron, which first surfaced toward the end of 2021, is that symptoms and cases have generally shown to be less severe and haven't led to many hospitalizations. Even so, this variant has been running rampant, so we certainly don't blame you if you still want to do whatever you can to avoid getting Covid at all costs, even if you've had an infection already.

While experts agree that getting vaccinated is the best way to not only lower your chances of coming down with Covid-19, but even more so in preventing severe cases, masking up in crowded or indoor spaces is undoubtedly also beneficial in adding further protection, even if you're fully vaxxed. And while any mask is better than no mask in these situations, there are certain types that are far more effective than others (cloth masks are a no-go, for example).

So if you're wondering if you need to upgrade your mask now, we asked an expert for his take on what your best bet is when it comes to protecting yourself and everyone else around you. Here's the lowdown, along with our recs for the four best masks on the market to protect against the Omicron variant.

What type of mask works best against Omicron?

According to **Serhat Gumrukcu, M.D.**, an infectious disease expert, research scientist and executive director at Seraph Research Institute in Toluca Lake, Calif., N95 masks are the most effective types of masks to protect against Omicron.

“Omicron is the most contagious variant we have yet and is important to wear high-quality and well-fitting masks,” he says. “The most important thing to look for is a mask that is approved by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health]; this information can be found on the packaging.”

If you’ve found yourself among the ranks confused by the difference between N95s and KN95 masks, you’re not alone. While both types offer similar levels of protection and work to filter out at least 95 percent of air particles, N95 masks are regulated as class II medical devices by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and NIOSH. While KN95s don’t have to meet as strict requirements in the U.S., they do meet international standards for safety and are also more widely available than N95s.

How to tell if your mask is real

As with many national and global crises, the pandemic has brought about scams in all kinds of ways, and fake masks unfortunately are no exception. To ensure you’ve got the real deal when it comes to optimal protection, first check to make sure it’s ISO/IEC 17025 lab tested. This is a CDC- recommended to confirm the mask meets the protective standards of its country of origin. You can check if a manufacturer is listed here. You should also make sure the brand name is visible on the mask itself and that it’s actually listed on the FDA’s Emergency Use Authorization and the CDC’s NIOSH-approved manufacturers lists (simply saying so on the box isn’t proof enough, unfortunately.)

While N95 and KN95s were in very short supply at the height of the pandemic in 2020; fortunately, they are much easier to come by now, whether you’re searching online or in-person. Now that there are also several brands to choose from; read on for our picks.



1. **3M Advanced Filtering Face Mask (3 Pack)** **\$9 AT ACE HARDWARE**

While the packaging on these masks doesn’t state the type, 3M is a NIOSH-approved manufacturer for N95 masks. Thus, these provide protection from at least 95% of airborne particles and feature a moldable nose clip to help you adjust it to best fit your face.



2. 3M N95 Particulate Respirator (8 Packs of 20 Respirators)

\$91 AT AMAZON

This mask might evoke thoughts of something you'd wear if working somewhere where the air quality could be particularly hazardous. You'd be right, and while these face coverings are NIOSH-approved for at least 95% filtration efficiency against certain non-oil-based particles, they're also a great option for protecting against Omicron, assuming you don't find them too bulky compared to N95s.



3. Kimberly-Clark PROFESSIONAL N95 Pouch Respirator (50 Pack)

\$48 AT AMAZON

These NPF respirator masks are less bulky than particulate respirators and are NIOSH-approved to provide the best protection against Omicron. They also have a bendable nosepiece to adjust the fit.



4. BNX N95 Mask (Black, 10 Pack)

\$22 AT AMAZON

These N95s also meet NIOSH requirements and come in black if you'd like a different color option that won't get as visibly dirty as the traditional white most come in.

<https://www.menshealth.com/health/g39493764/omicron-covid-face-masks/>