

# How to Choose the Right Face Mask to Protect Yourself From Haze

*Using the wrong face mask not only gives a false sense of security, but may also put your life at risk. Learn to pick the face mask that is right for you in this article.*

The sale of face masks has picked up significantly ever since [Singapore was blanketed by smoke](#) from Indonesia on Monday, 17 June 2013. Stocks for face masks have reportedly sold out in a number of stores and are yet to be replenished.

But some common face masks available in stores may not provide sufficient protection against haze particles. Every face mask is constructed for a specific purpose, and choosing the wrong one will only give a false sense of security and little real life protection.

Below we look at some common face masks and offer some suggestions on the right masks you should get:

## Surgical Masks



Common surgical masks shown in the diagram are meant to catch the *wearer's own bodily fluids*, such as saliva and nasal discharge, and prevent any infectious liquid droplets from spreading to others.

They are **not** designed to protect you from inhaling airborne bacteria, viruses and [fine particles](#).

Surgical masks typically have two straps, one on each side, that hook over the ears. Some may come with one strap that goes above the ears.

A surgical mask should be worn if you are down with a cold, flu, or cough, and when you are working with patients.

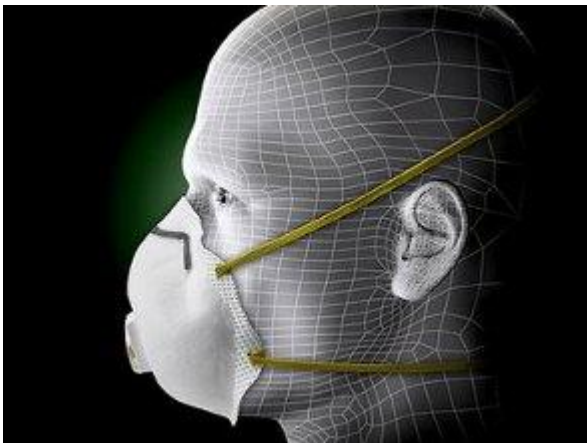
**Surgical masks cannot provide adequate protection against fine particles present in smoke and haze.**

## Respirators

Respirators, also known as particulate respirators, are devices designed to protect the wearer from inhaling harmful dusts, fumes, vapors or gases.

There are two main forms of respirators: disposable and reusable.

- **Disposable Respirators**



Disposable respirators are masks that have the word “**NIOSH**” and either “**N95**”, “**N99**”, “**N100**”, “**R95**”, “**R99**”, “**R100**”, “**P95**”, “**P99**” or “**P100**” printed on them.

NIOSH stands for the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#). It is a U.S. federal agency that conducts research and make recommendations for the prevention of work-related injury and illness. A product that bears the word NIOSH means it meets certain standard recommended by the agency.

The letter refers to the oil resistance of the respirator as indicated below:

**N:** Not oil resistant

**R:** Oil resistant

**P:** Oil proof

The number indicates the minimum amount of airborne particles (in percentage) that the respirator is able to filter. For instance, if a respirator is “**N95**” certified, it means it can filter at least 95% of particles that do not contain oil.

Disposable respirators, such as [3M N95 Particulate Respirator](#), should come with at least two straps that go around the head, one above the ears and one below. This ensures a tighter and closer fit to prevent particles from seeping through any loose gap.

It is important to wear the mask snugly over your nose and under your chin. A mask that is worn loosely will not give adequate protection.

Disposable respirators are only meant for single use as their filters cannot be cleaned or replaced. They should be replaced regularly.

It should also be noted that disposable respirators usually come in only one adult size. **They will not fit children and toddlers.**

Unused disposable respirators are valid for about three years from the date of manufacture, if they are not opened and are stored properly. Some brands may last longer or shorter; be sure to check the expiry date before use.

**When used properly, a disposable respirator can protect you from smoke and haze.**

- **Reusable Respirators**



Examples of reusable respirators are those used by firefighters and people who work with dangerous chemicals. They come in either full face or half face.

Reusable respirators that come with air purifying feature, such as the [half face particulate respirator](#) shown in the picture, can be fitted with different types of filters to provide the level of protection that you need. For example, the pink filters used in the respirator shown is P100-certified.

Reusable respirators come in a few different sizes, usually small, medium and large, to fit different faces. That said, they are usually not meant to fit the small face of young kids.

**One major advantage reusable respirators have over disposable ones is that they conform better to the curves of the face, giving a tighter and more comfortable seal (and hence better protection) than disposable respirators.**

Unlike disposable respirators, filters on reusable respirators also last longer, can be used multiple times and can be replaced easily.

Some reusable respirators can even be connected to an alternative air supply, such as a high-pressure gas tank, to completely eliminate any chances of inhaling toxic particles.

**When used properly, reusable respirators offer the best protection against haze and smoke.**