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White House to give away 400 million N95 masks starting next week

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The Biden administration will begin making 400 million N95 masks available for free to Americans starting next week, now that federal officials stress that these masks give better protection against the omicron variant of COVID-19 compared to cloth face coverings.

The White House announced Wednesday that the masks will come from the government's Strategic National Stockpile, which has more than 750 million of the highly protective masks on hand. The masks will be available for pickup at pharmacies and community health centers across the country. They will begin shipping this week for distribution starting late next week, the White House said.

This will be the largest distribution of free masks by the federal government to the public since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The White House said the masks will be made available at pharmacies and community health centers that have

partnered with the federal government's COVID-19 vaccination campaign.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday updated its guidance on face coverings to more clearly state that properly fitted N95 and KN95 masks offer the most protection against COVID-19. Still, it didn't formally recommend N95s over cloth masks.

No specifics of the program, including the sort of masks to be provided, whether kid-size ones will be available and could the masks be reworn.

The White House said that "to ensure broad access for all Americans, there will be three masks available per person."

N95 or KN95 masks are generally more costly than less-protective surgical masks, cloth masks or bandannas.

Can you reuse N95 and KN95 masks?

CDC guidelines recommend wearing your N95 and KN95 mask for no more than five uses, however, some experts offered tips on how to prolong your mask wear and keep them clean.

Dr. [Joseph Gastaldo](#), a physician who specializes in infectious diseases with OhioHealth recommends

rotating your masks, washing your hands and storing them well, you can get five to a little bit more uses with them," Gastaldo said.

Gastaldo said sanitizing your hands before touching the mask is crucial and storing them outside or "in heat" will help keep the mask dry and clean. Dr. Sabrina Assoumou, an infectious disease physician at Boston Medical Center, echoed Gastaldo's recommendation.

"For an N95, we'd recommend you switch (the mask) every day," Assoumou explains. "But you can rotate them. If you have three masks, (for example), you could number them and switch them around."

Assoumou added you can catch signs of when to throw out your N95 or KN95 mask such as "fraying, stretched out straps or a deterioration of the mask."

The CDC said each time you wear and take off your N95 mask the straps weaken and eventually they won't be able to "generate enough force to create a tight seal with the face."

How should you store your masks?

Heating is one of the best strategies for cleaning an N95 mask, [according to the CDC](#) – the mask can be heated at a maximum of 158 degrees Fahrenheit for 60 minutes. It recommends hanging the mask in your oven using a wooden or plastic clip.

The N95 masks can also be steamed and boiled if the plastic straps are not exposed, it's not recommended to use soap or water to clean the mask.

"Lots of people will store their mask in a brown paper bag to keep it away from dirt and germs on surfaces. Others will store it outside in the heat to kill off any germs and keep it dry," Gastaldo said. "All of this cleaning will ensure you can use your N95 and KN95 mask for longer."