

COVID-19 Appropriate Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Information for Employers

There is currently a global shortage of PPE that is affecting the healthcare system. N95 respirators, surgical/procedure masks, protective eye wear/face shields, gloves, and gowns are the critical PPE required to protect healthcare workers when caring for those infected with the COVID-19 virus.

Employers who have created PPE policies specifically to protect employees from the COVID-19 virus are encouraged to re-examine these policies to ensure valuable PPE resources are not unnecessarily diverted from the healthcare system. This advice is not intended to change established PPE requirements for an employee's day-to-day work activities.

Employers and staff should adhere to the basic requirements of frequent handwashing, physical distancing, and staying home when ill.

PPE Use in the Healthcare System

Note: as of April 17, 2020, the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) implemented [Continuous Use Masking Principles and Guidelines](#). The SHA now requires surgical/procedure masks to be worn by all staff and physicians who may come into direct or indirect contact with patients/residents/clients in clinical care areas. Masks are not required in common areas of healthcare facilities (i.e. hallways or waiting areas unless individuals are symptomatic).

As with other employment sectors, the healthcare system uses engineered controls, administrative controls, and PPE to address the many hazards faced by health care workers. There are extensive PPE requirements for employees in the health care system.

The appropriate use of PPE to protect against the COVID-19 virus is based on established infection prevention and control measures implemented by health authorities. PPE requirements based on droplet and contact precautions include:

- Gloves, a long-sleeved gown, procedure/surgical mask, and facial/eye protection when entering a patient room and in close contact with a COVID-19 patient. These items must be removed after leaving their room.
- Gloves, long-sleeved gown, an N95 respirator, and facial/eye protection when in direct contact with a COVID-19 patient and an aerosol generating medical procedure is performed that could result in fluid from the patient's respiratory system becoming airborne (e.g. intubation, CPR).
- Proper hand hygiene including washing with soap and water or alcohol based hand rubs when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Masks and other disposable PPE can be discarded into a plastic-lined garbage container.

PPE Use in Non Health Care Settings

Most workers in non healthcare settings will not require PPE for protection against the COVID-19 virus unless they are in situations similar to health care workers. Non-PPE controls should be put into place by employers as often as possible.

Orders from the provincial Chief Medical Health Officer (CMHO) and support to employers and businesses provided by the Ministry of Labour Relations and Workplace safety represent the minimum standard that employers must meet, to comply with obligations to ensure worker health and safety. To address health and safety concerns in the workplace raised by COVID-19, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *How are you telling your workers about COVID-19 (i.e. exposure to COVID-19 in your workplace)?*
2. *Do you have a system in place where workers (including occupational health committee (OHC) or an occupational health and safety representative) can inform you of concerns relating to being exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace?*

Find out if there are any specific tasks that concern them (e.g. tasks that involve interacting with others).

Identifying exposure hazards and developing measures to control exposure

3. *What are you doing to prevent your workers from being exposed to COVID-19?*
 - Have you done a walk-through of your workplace, to identify specific conditions or tasks that may increase the risk of exposure of your workers to COVID-19?
 - Have you asked your workers (including your occupational health and safety committee (OHC) or an occupational health and safety representative) where potential exposures may occur and how they think exposures can be controlled?
 - Are tasks that require PPE really necessary at this time or can it wait?
4. *Have you developed controls that will eliminate or minimize the risk of exposure?*
 - What are those controls?
 - Have you put them in place?
 - How are they working (are they effective)?
 - How do you know how they are working?

Controlling the number of people on site

5. *How are you controlling the number of workers and other people at your workplace?*
 - Do all your workers need to come to work? Can some work from home? (Learn about Health and safety responsibilities when working from home.)
 - Can you stagger shifts, to reduce the numbers present at one time?
 - Are you ensuring there is adequate cleaning between shifts?
 - Can you prioritize the work that needs to be done at the workplace to help your business operate as close to normal under the circumstances? This will require a determination of core work and where it can safely and productively be performed.

6. *If you have workers who need to come to the workplace, how are you ensuring the following steps are being taken to reduce their risk of COVID-19 exposure? Different workplaces will have different needs but the following steps are a good start:*

- Workplaces may have physical barriers in place e.g. Plexi-glass, drive through windows for customer service
- Position workers to allow for physical distancing. Keep 2 metres distance between workers and customers, clients, and other workers.
- Provide soap and water or hand sanitizers and encourage workers to wash their hands frequently.
- Enhance cleaning and disinfecting of the workplace, particularly high-contact items such as door handles, faucet handles, keyboards, and shared equipment (e.g., photocopiers).

7. *How are you checking and tracking whether the above steps are being taken?*

What's the different between a surgical/procedure mask and an N95 respirator?

A surgical/procedure mask is not a respirator. Instead, it is a device that is intended to prevent droplets from an infected source from contaminating the skin and mucous membranes of the nose and mouth of the wearer. These masks can be worn by people infected with the COVID-19 virus to trap droplets expelled when coughing or sneezing. Healthcare workers routinely use surgical masks as part of their PPE requirement.

N95 is a National Institute for Occupation Safety and Health (NIOSH) approved air-purifying, negative pressure, particulate filtering, disposable, half-face piece respirator. These devices are designed to protect the user from inhaling hazardous airborne particles and aerosols including dusts and infection agents such as the COVID-19 virus. A N95 respirator is a commonly used protective device in health care settings.

N95 respirators require initial and ongoing training for their proper use as well as an approved method for fit-testing to ensure a tight facial seal that will protect the wearer. Without this training and fit-testing, N95s will not be considered effective at protecting the wearer against the COVID-19 virus.



Left: Surgical/procedure mask. Right: N95 respirator

What are some non-health care occupations that may require PPE to protect against COVID-19?

Many tasks performed by workers in non-healthcare settings will not require PPE.

Occupations that require workers to come into close contact (less than 2 meters) with people known or suspected of having the COVID-19 need to take extra precautions, including wearing PPE. Examples of occupations include but are not limited to:

- First responders (e.g. police and fire officials);
- Corrections officials;
- Group home and personal care home workers responsible for resident care;
- Funeral home staff;
- Public health officials.

Should workers in non-healthcare settings be advised to wear a homemade non-medical/cloth mask?

There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of homemade cloth masks. Employers may use their discretion to allow staff who are otherwise healthy to wear homemade masks.

For further information on COVID19 please visit:

- Government of Saskatchewan: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/coronavirus>
- WorkSafe Saskatchewan: <http://www.worksafesask.ca/covid-19>
- Workers Compensation Board (SK): <http://www.worksafesask.ca/covid-19>