

Directive on the Continuous Use of Masks for Full Shifts in Health-care Settings

The Pandemic Task Force is clarifying its directive on the continuous use of surgical/procedure masks by health-care workers (HCWs).

This directive is being issued in response to the emerging evidence that asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals can transmit COVID-19 and is meant to prevent transmission of COVID-19 by HCWs to their patients and co-workers.

Continuous use of masks is the practice of wearing the same mask for repeated close contact with different patients, without removing the mask between patient encounters. The duration of the continuous use is dependent on the nature of the task or activity being undertaken.

This directive aligns with the guidance provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). It also supports the previous provincial initiatives aimed at improving safety for both HCWs and patients, while maintaining judicious use of masks and PPE.

While this initiative will increase the use of PPE, in other jurisdictions, a consistent policy of continuous mask use has led to reductions in overall PPE usage. PPE conservation is critical, and a sustainable approach is required. Supplies are being monitored closely and guidance is being developed for emergency prioritization of PPE should a shortage occur. **It is recommended that HCWs minimize their mask use to two masks per shift where possible.**

Clinical Settings

All HCWs working in all patient care areas who have any face-to-face (direct) or indirect contact with patients must wear a surgical/procedure mask **continuously, at all times and in all areas of their workplace** when a physical distance of two metres cannot be maintained and a physical barrier (ie: plexiglass) is not in place to prevent transmission of droplets.

- The surgical/procedure mask should be immediately changed and safely disposed of whenever it is damaged, soiled/wet, and after care for any patient on Droplet/Contact or Contact Isolation Precautions.
- HCWs must take care not to touch the front of their mask. If they touch or adjust their mask they must immediately perform hand hygiene.
- HCWs will leave the patient's room if they need to remove their mask.
- HCWs will follow all Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) protocols including hand hygiene and the use of additional PPE when delivering patient care according to the IPC point-of-care risk assessment (PCRA).
- When taking a break or eating a meal, the HCW must remove their mask per the guidance for extended and reuse below. If the mask is not damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated, it should be stored safely for reuse. Physical distancing must be maintained while the mask is removed. A mask should be donned per the instructions below before returning to work.
- Do not touch the outside of your mask while it is on your face or pull your mask below your chin while you're wearing it. Improperly wearing a mask increases the risk for cross contamination.

- Masks (surgical/procedure/N95) do not need to be changed between COVID (+) patients on dedicated units except when damaged/soiled/wet or when indicated according to PCRA. **Masks cannot be reused on COVID units.**

Non-Clinical Settings

All HCWs who do not work in patient care areas must wear a surgical/procedure mask when physical distancing cannot be maintained.

- Do not touch the outside of your mask while it is on your face or pull your mask below your chin while you're wearing it. Improperly wearing a mask increases the risk for cross contamination.

Initial Use - Guidance for Donning Surgical/Procedure Mask for Continuous Use

All HCWs will mark their initials on the outside of a clean, unused mask prior to donning. This will allow the HCW to easily identify which side of the mask is the outside of the mask so that the mask can be safely handled.

Guidance for Doffing Procedure Mask with Loops for Continuous Use

- Clean hands.
- Remove the procedure mask by holding the ear loops.
- The front is contaminated, so remove slowly and carefully.
- After removing the mask, visually inspect it to determine if the mask has been damaged or is soiled/wet or contaminated. If damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated, the mask must be discarded.
- If the procedure mask is NOT damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated, it should be stored for re-use.
- Fold the mask in half (lengthwise or widthwise), so the outside surfaces are touching each other, carefully store in a paper bag labelled with your name and date. This will avoid destroying the shape of the mask and will prevent contamination.
- Clean hands.
- A disposable procedure mask can be worn for several hours if not damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated.

Guidance for Doffing Surgical Mask with Ties for Continuous Use

- Clean hands.
- Remove the surgical mask by untying the bottom ties and then the top ties. (If the ties cannot be undone without tearing the ties, the mask will be discarded).
- The front is contaminated, so remove slowly and carefully.

- After removing facemask, visually inspect to determine if the mask has been damaged or is soiled/wet or contaminated. If damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated the mask must be discarded.
- If the surgical/ procedure mask is NOT damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated, it should be stored for re-use.
- Fold the mask in half (lengthwise or widthwise), so the outside surfaces are touching each other, carefully store in a paper bag labelled with your name and date. This will avoid destroying the shape of the mask and to prevent contamination.
- Clean hands.
- A disposable surgical mask can be worn for several hours if not damaged, soiled/wet or contaminated.

Guidance for Donning the Used Surgical/Procedure Mask

- Perform hand hygiene.
- Slowly open your mask storage bag.
- Grasp the mask by the elastic ear loops/ties to remove it from the bag, then look to see where the outside of the mask is by locating your identifying mark.
- Use the ear loops and ties to put it on and tuck it under your chin.
- Secure it to your face at the bridge of your nose.
- Clean hands.

References

Mask Wearing 101: How to Use & Re-Use a Face Mask. Sarasota Memorial Healthcare System
<https://www.smh.com/blog/mask-wearing-101-how-to-use-re-use-a-face-mask>

Nebraska Medicine COVID-19 PPE Guidance. Extended Use and Limited Reuse of Disposable Facemasks, Respirators and Protective Eyewear
<https://www.nebraskamed.com/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19/COVID-Extended-Use-Reuse-of-PPEand-N95.pdf?date03212020>

Alberta Health Services: Guidelines for Continuous Masking in Healthcare Settings
<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-ppe-continuous-use-guidancemasking.pdf>

Nova Scotia Health Authority: Healthcare Worker Masking Guidelines during COVID-19 Pandemic Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
http://policy.nshealth.ca/Site_Published/covid19/document_render.aspx?documentRender.IdType=6&documentRender.GenericField=&documentRender.Id=77860

CDC: Strategies for Optimizing the Supply of Facemasks <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ppe-strategy/face-masks.html>