

AHS Guidelines for Continuous Masking in Healthcare settings

Purpose: This document outlines standards for use of procedure masks by all healthcare workers (HCW)* who work in patient care areas in AHS and community settings.

Background: Community spread of COVID-19 is increasing in Alberta. This means that the likelihood of any individual coming in contact with or being infected with COVID-19 is increasing. There is emerging evidence that asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic or minimally symptomatic individuals can transmit COVID-19. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has issued updated recommendations that healthcare workers should mask when providing direct care to prevent transmission to patients and to their co-workers.

At the same time, we need to consider how we may conserve use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to ensure supplies will be sufficient over the next several weeks and months as we experience the projected increase in patients with COVID-19.

A reasoned strategy of procedure mask use will protect patients from inadvertent exposure from HCW, will minimize HCW exposures from each other and will conserve PPE.

Consistent with guidance provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada and Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, AHS is implementing a continuous masking strategy, in addition to use of PPE as part of droplet and contact precautions. These guidelines are intended to bring consistency across AHS and community healthcare settings, improve safety for both HCW and patients, while aiming for judicious use of masks and PPE.

Justification for Recommendations:

1. Healthcare workers with no symptoms of COVID-19 who are in the incubation period could inadvertently infect patients and other staff prior to developing symptoms.
2. A broader HCW masking policy may reduce the number of staff required to be furloughed in the event of exposure to COVID-19.
3. PPE conservation is critical and a sustainable approach is required. In other jurisdictions, a consistent policy of continuous mask use has led to reductions in overall PPE use.

* Compliance with this document is required by all Alberta Health Services employees, members of the medical and midwifery staffs, students, volunteers, and other persons acting on behalf AHS (including contracted service providers as necessary).

Recommended Approach:

1. Masking of HCW providing direct patient care or working in patient care areas in both AHS and community settings:
 - a. HCW should wear a surgical/procedure mask continuously, at all times and in all areas of their workplace if they are involved in direct patient contact or cannot maintain adequate social distancing from patients and co-workers.
 - b. HCW are asked to use surgical/procedure masks in a judicious manner to help conserve supplies and ensure availability throughout this COVID-19 pandemic.
 - c. The surgical/procedure mask should be immediately changed and safely disposed of whenever it is soiled or wet, whenever the HCW feels it may have become contaminated and after care for any patient on Droplet +/- Contact precautions (i.e. suspected or confirmed influenza-like illness or COVID-19).
 - d. Follow Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) protocols including hand hygiene and the use of additional personal protective equipment when delivering patient care according to the AHS point-of-care risk assessment (PCRA) (<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/healthinfo/ipc/hi-ipc-acute-care-pcra.pdf>).
 - e. Additional guidance is available for extended PPE use in dedicated COVID-19 units and ILI positive holding areas (*link*)
 - f. When taking a break, or eating a meal, the wearer should dispose of the mask and perform hand hygiene. Social distancing must be maintained and a new mask should be applied before returning to work.

2. Masking for healthcare workers who do not work in patient care areas or have direct patient contact:
 - a. All staff who can perform their duties from home should do so to preserve PPE.
 - b. Individuals whose function must be performed in person do not need to wear a mask but should practice social distancing.
 - c. Masking is required if social distancing cannot be maintained or if entry into patient care areas is required.

For community settings where PPE supplies are required, please contact:
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