

Home Care Worker Masking Protocol during COVID-19 Pandemic Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

April 14, 2020

The Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness is recommending a new practice around masking of its health care workers (HCW) during the COVID-19 pandemic working in a variety of sectors, including home care. Specifically, home care workers visiting client homes, and providing either direct or indirect (i.e., housekeeping and dietary) client care will be asked to wear a procedure mask throughout their entire shift. Two (2) procedure masks per shift will be distributed by the shift supervisor/manager.

For information regarding the distribution/collection of masks at the start of your shift, please contact your manager or designate.

1. Who should wear masks?

- Any HCWs who have any face-to-face (direct) or indirect contact with clients should wear a mask. If you are uncertain if you are included in this definition, please contact your manager.
- HCWs who do not perform client visits are not required to wear masks.

2. Why are we being asked to wear the same mask throughout the day?

- Several other provinces have seen a rapid increase in the prevalence of COVID-19 in their communities. As we begin to see increasing community spread in Nova Scotia, we want to be ahead of this situation.
- Some staff have been coming to work with mild symptoms, which they do not necessarily perceive to be an infection or are coming to work while they are well and then later developing mild upper respiratory tract infection symptoms while on duty. This poses a safety risk to our both our clients, their live-in family members, and other staff, resulting in exposures.
- We are taking this increased measure to ensure the continued safety of both staff and clients.
- Given the expected challenges in maintaining long term supply of PPE, extended use of masks, if used properly, may conserve the supply of needed procedure masks while enhancing the safety of clients and HCWs.
- If your mask becomes soiled or wet (including perspiration) throughout your shift, please use the second mask issued to you at the beginning of your shift. If you run out, contact your manager who will have a supply of additional masks.

3. We have been asked to wear a mask at all times during our shift. When can I remove the mask?

- As a home care worker, your mask should be removed whenever you complete a visit or when you use the restroom. Once you have exited the client's residence, the mask should be removed and placed in a dry paper bag and stored in a safe place.

4. When I need to remove my mask, how do I remove it safely?

- When you need to remove your mask for a break, meal, or restroom break, please do the following:
 - Take a clean, dry paper bag and write your name on it. This is important to make sure the mask can be clearly identified as yours.
 - Remove the mask using the ear loops and fold the mask lengthwise from top to bottom, with the front (i.e., resident-facing) side in and the side that will be against your face out (see video).
 - Store your mask in a safe place in a clean, dry paper bag labeled with your name. Note: This bag should be discarded after each use.
 - Meticulous hand hygiene should occur before and after removing your mask and before putting the mask back on your face.

5. When is it appropriate to DISCARD my mask and use a new one?

- If your mask gets soiled during the course of your shift, you can request an additional mask as needed. Your mask should only be discarded and replaced when:
 - it is visibly soiled
 - it makes direct contact with a resident
 - it becomes so moist/humid that its integrity is affected (this includes perspiration)

If your mask remains unsoiled, the same mask should be used throughout your shift to conserve supply.

6. How can I tell if my mask is soiled and should be discarded?

- If the mask is directly exposed to respiratory droplets (through saliva/cough/sneeze).
- If you touch the mask accidentally with visibly soiled hands.
- If your mask is soaked with perspiration.

Note: If the mask is covered with a face shield that was properly placed to completely cover the face, the mask is protected from these droplets.

7. How often should I discard and replace the paper bag in which I'm storing my mask?

- The paper bag should be discarded after each use.

8. What if I get a mask that doesn't fit properly?

- It's important that your mask fits you properly so that it doesn't fall off. This is what will ensure the protection of clients, their live-in family members, other staff, and yourself. Please talk to your supervisor if you've been given a mask that does not fit properly.

9. Can I bring my OWN procedure masks?

- No. At this time, we do not support personnel bringing in their own supply of masks. Procedure masks purchased for home care are controlled for quality and we cannot be sure that masks coming from elsewhere meet quality standards.

10. Can health care workers wear homemade masks at work?

- No. Home care workers are advised to wear surgical masks, as we cannot validate the efficacy of homemade masks in preventing the spread of infection.

11. What if I need to be present during an aerosol-generating medical procedure (AGMP) with a client who has been identified as a suspect or confirmed COVID-19 case?

- Perform hand hygiene and remove your procedure mask (place in dedicated bag/storage area – see FAQ #4 above).
- Don a fit-tested N95 Respirator and any other PPE required based on additional precautions as determined by the Point-of-Care Risk Assessment (PCRA) conducted prior to client interaction. Additional PPE required may include gloves, gowns, and eye protection/face shield for patients determined to need droplet and contact precautions.
- Upon leaving the client home, doff PPE appropriately. After performing hand hygiene, re-don your procedure mask.

12. How else can I protect myself?

- Clean your hands before and after touching the mask for any reason.
- Avoid touching the mask unless necessary for donning/doffing and, if required, only do so by the straps.
- Ensure you are wearing the procedure mask appropriately. Masks should:
 - fully cover your mouth and nose
 - be pulled down to cover your chin
 - be fitted to your nose. Press down to mold the metallic strip over the bridge of your nose
- Do not partially remove the mask by pulling it down under your chin. The mask is either fully on or fully off. Do not hang the mask around your neck or from your ear.
- Clean your hands before and after contact with every resident.
- Do NOT come to work when ill. Contact your manager as soon as possible if you do become ill.

12. What else do I need to think about?

- Do NOT attempt to sanitize/clean the procedure mask.
- If you have discarded your allocated masks, report to the place where you acquired your mask at the beginning of the shift to request a new one.