

MASKING POLICY AT ISLAND HEALTH: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following are questions and answers regarding masking during the COVID-19 pandemic within Island Health. This document will be added to/updated as information becomes available. Send your questions to pandemic@viha.ca.

- NEW QUESTION & ANSWER
 - RECENT QUESTION & ANSWER (FROM 1 PREVIOUS VERSION OF FAQ)
 - UPDATED RESPONSE
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1. Why is it necessary to wear a mask?

UPDATED: COVID-19 is spread by the respiratory droplets an infected person produces when they breathe, cough, sneeze, talk in a raised voice, or sing. If you are in close contact with an infected person (within 2 metres), the virus can enter your body if droplets get into your throat, nose, or eyes. The use of masks is particularly important in care settings where people are vulnerable. Masks are one method of source control and are recommended as a barrier to droplets. See also: [Masks Protect You & Me](#) (CDC). **Vaccinated staff working in Long Term Care should refer to the latest update in the [Mask Policy](#).**

2. Why is it necessary to wear a medical-grade mask in healthcare settings?

Medical-grade (surgical) masks are standardized PPE and have been tested and approved by Health Canada. There is a grade and pressure the medical mask can tolerate and the effectiveness of the protection has been measured. Cloth masks have not been standardized or tested in the same way.

3. Where do I get a mask when I get to work?

Staff and medical staff working in care facilities should bring a clean medical-grade mask with them for entry into the facility. **RECENT:** Because of theft, these supplies are no longer available at staff entry points; therefore, we ask everyone to ensure they are prepared in advance by taking a medical-grade mask home with them to wear on their next shift or work day.

Staff working in corporate, non-care facilities are asked to bring their own re-usable, non-medical, 3-layer cloth mask to work for use in common/shared spaces.

In both cases, if you do not have a medical-grade mask with you when entering a patient care facility, please enter via a main access point and obtain one from an Ambassador.

ORDERING: While supplies are available, Managers in non-care facilities can arrange for a supply of non-medical-grade masks, including cloth masks, for their staff by contacting PandemicLogistics@viha.ca.

For staff who need to transfer through or visit a healthcare facility, please order medical-grade masks through regular Stores ordering processes ([complete a requisition](#), update your unit's top-up levels, or reach out to PandemicLogistics@viha.ca for additional guidance).

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4. Why are we not wearing N95 masks? BC Paramedics have had respirator protection from the beginning.

Paramedics attend medical emergencies in unknown and unpredictable environments, and where it is unknown if the patient has an airborne disease. At Island Health our [PPE guidelines](#) follow the best practice guidance of the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, the BC Provincial Health Officer and the Medical Director of the BCCDC – who all concur that a medical-grade mask provides excellent protection for the wearer and the person being treated. Currently, N95s are available for those who are fit tested for AGMPs, and are to be used with people who are assessed to be a yellow or red COVID case or for other patients on airborne precautions. For more information, please see: [AGMPs and PPE Requirements: Patients Suspected, Confirmed or at Risk of COVID-19](#).

5. Who has the final say if there are any doubts about whether to wear a mask?

There is a masking policy in place that provides clear instructions about when to wear a mask at Island Health. If you are unsure whether the [Mask Policy](#) applies to you, please err on the side of caution and wear a medical-grade mask – then speak with your leader or local [JOHS Committee](#) representative to get advice.

6. Who is responsible for enforcing this policy? I often see staff not wearing masks.

Island Health's [Mask Policy](#) requires healthcare workers to wear a mask at all times in our facilities unless they are eating or drinking – in which case 2 metres of physical distance from others must be maintained. If you see a colleague not wearing their mask, there are three steps you can take:

1. Help your colleagues follow the mask requirements by gently reminding them of the policy.
2. If necessary, find a leader as soon as possible to help address the problem.
3. If you can't find a leader in a reasonable amount of time, or you feel the policy is not being enforced, contact HR Access:
 - Direct: 250.519.7717 (or 28411 internally)
 - Toll free: 1.888.296.3963
 - Email: hraccess@viha.ca

7. What is the correct way to hand out a clean mask to someone?

With clean hands, healthcare team members should pull a mask from the box and individually hand them out to patients and visitors. It should not be a self-serve approach.

8. How often should I change my medical-grade mask?

RECENT: Even with the recent changes in PPE supply, it is still important to safeguard the supply chain, so you are encouraged to wear your medical-grade mask longer than the usual practice, between patients. However you must change your mask:

- RECENT: throughout the day as it becomes wet, soiled or damaged
- after working with any patient/client/resident who is on droplet and contact precautions
- RECENT: when going for a break (you should replace with a clean medical-grade mask)
- RECENT: after performing an AGMP on a patient, resident or client who is not suspected or confirmed COVID-19

Note: For CHS workers, if you do not need to remove your mask for any of the above reasons, you are able to keep it on for multiple client visits

Ensure you have completed hand hygiene whenever you touch your mask or remove it and again before putting on a clean mask. If you take off your medical-grade mask (fully or partially from your mouth/nose), you must **NOT** put it back on. It must be discarded, not re-used. Refer to [PPE During COVID-19 Pandemic](#) and the [Mask Policy](#) for further information on doffing.

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9. Can I wear a face shield instead of a mask?

Face shields alone do not provide the same protection, therefore, a mask must be worn. See [eye protection FAQs](#).

10. I experience skin allergies when wearing the standard medical-grade masks. What should I do?

There is a reporting process for people who are having skin/allergy issues with their masks. First speak with your leader to see if there is a different product that can be ordered. [CLICK HERE](#) for more information. Read more about [caring for skin with prolonged PPE use](#).

11. Is there a sign or poster that we can use?

Yes. There are two signs available on our *COVID-19* Intranet page (under *Signage*). Please order via: printing@viha.ca.

12. Can staff still lunch together (with masks removed to eat) if our lunch areas don't provide enough room for 2 metres of space?

Staff need to maintain 2 metres from one another when eating/drinking in common areas (while masks are off), which may require staff who are lunching/breaking at the same time to seek different spaces that provide adequate distancing on the site. Reminder that we should never pull a mask down and lift back up. Please refer to the [Physical Distancing at Work and the Use of Masks](#) document and the [Mask Policy](#) for more information.

13. If we're attending an in-person meeting (i.e., morning rounds), do we all need to wear masks?

Yes, a medical-grade mask must be worn.

14. If I'm working in my enclosed office within a health-care facility, do I need to wear a medical-grade mask? What about in a cubicled/shared space?

If you are working alone in an enclosed office, then you do not need to wear a mask. If others enter the same office, or you leave your office (e.g., hallway, washrooms, copy rooms) then you must wear your mask. With COVID-19 circulating in our communities, the safest option for common/shared work spaces, is to wear a mask – even with distancing and barriers.

Please refer to the [Mask Policy](#) for details on what type of mask to wear in which work environment.

15. Are employees supposed to wear masks and eye protection in the common areas of workplace settings? What about in Assisted Living/Independent Seniors Living facilities?

Go to the [mask policy](#) and [PPE During COVID-19 Pandemic](#) for further details. All settings where CHS staff interact with patients, clients, residents and families a medical grade mask / eye protection should be worn.

16. Is my patient required to wear a mask when they are taken to X-ray in a hospital setting, even if they don't have any COVID-19 like symptoms?

Yes. When any patient is taken from their room to another department, whether they are on additional IPAC precautions or not, they should still wear a medical-grade mask.

17. Is my patient or home support client required to wear a mask?

In a healthcare setting, if a patient is spending periods of time out of their room for mobilizing or visiting common areas such as a coffee-shop, they must be asked to wear a medical-grade mask.

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Clients living in their own homes do NOT need to wear medical-grade masks during home support visits. If they have COVID-19 symptoms, and at the healthcare providers' discretion, the client can be asked to wear a medical-grade mask, but they are not obligated to do so.

Healthcare providers visiting clients in their homes are required to wear a medical-grade mask. Island Health distributed medical grade masks are designed and tested to repel fluid and will protect both the client **and** the healthcare worker. Please conduct a point-of-care risk assessment to determine if other PPE is required. The medical-grade mask and other PPE (if required) will help to protect health-care providers during their visits.

18. Do other residents in the household of a home support client need to wear a medical-grade mask?

Other residents should maintain physical distance (for example, stay in another part of the home) during home support visits where possible. If they are involved in client care and need to be present, they are required to wear a mask as physical distance cannot be maintained. They should also practice hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette (cough or sneeze into elbow sleeve, dispose tissues) to reduce the risks of transmission.

19. What if my client/patient/resident does not want to wear a mask?

It is sometimes helpful to have a conversation with them about the value of wearing a medical-grade mask to themselves and others. However, we will not be refusing care or penalizing patients if they refuse.

20. Are there any exemptions to patients/residents having to wear masks outside their rooms in healthcare settings?

Yes – there are exemptions, as follows:

- A person who is less than 12 years of age – *children between 2-12 years of age should be encouraged to wear a pediatric sized medical grade mask, but not enforced*
- A person who is unable to wear a face covering because of
 - A psychological, behavioural or health condition, or
 - A physical, cognitive or mental impairment
- A person who is unable to put on or remove a face covering without the assistance of another person

21. Are child visitors required to wear a medical-grade mask when visiting?

Yes.

- Children above 12 year of age are required to wear an appropriately sized medical-grade mask
- Children between between 2-12 years of age should be encouraged to wear a pediatric sized medical grade mask

22. What action should staff take when a client/patient presents for care and indicates that they are exempt from masking and have no proof of exemption?

- Take the person at their word
- Do not request proof of mask exemption
- Engage with those not masking respectfully
- In conjunction with direction from your operational leadership the following resources can be leveraged to support respectful engagement:
 - [Patient Masking Response Guidelines for Outpatient Clinics](#)
 - [Greeting and Engagement Tips: Patient Ambassadors](#)

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- When appropriate precautions are taken, the risk to staff and others is low
- Contact leadership for support if needed, and mitigate risks according to local procedures

23. How should I dispose of my medical grade masks safely?

- Please remember to dispose of your medical-grade mask appropriately directly into a garbage bin. This is the case both on and off Island Health premises.
- Be responsible, do not discard on the floor in a healthcare facility or outside

For more information:

- Read the [Ministry of Health Masking Policy](#) (November 4)
- Island Health [PPE Guidelines](#)