



MINISTRY OF HEALTH  
POLICY COMMUNIQUÉ

COMMUNIQUÉ

TO: Health Authority CEOs

TRANSMITTAL DATE: October 13, 2023

COMMUNIQUÉ 2023-04  
NUMBER:

CLIFF NUMBER: 1266853

SUBJECT: Infection Prevention and Control Measures  
for Viral Respiratory Illness Season.

DETAILS: This document outlines Ministry of Health requirements  
for preventing and controlling viral respiratory illness,  
including COVID-19, influenza, and respiratory syncytial  
virus (RSV).

This document replaces Policy Communique 2020-05 –  
*Mask Use in Health Care Facilities During the COVID-19  
Pandemic*, as well as Policy Communique 2020-01 –  
*Infection Prevention and Control for COVID-19*.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Immediately.

MINISTRY CONTACT: Brian Sagar, Executive Director, Communicable Disease  
Prevention and Control Branch, Population and Public  
Health Division.

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Stephen Brown  
Deputy Minister  
Ministry of Health

## Ministry of Health Policy

### Infection Prevention and Control Measures for Viral Respiratory Illness Season

#### Policy Objective & Scope

- This policy protects health care workers (clinical and non-clinical), patients, residents, clients, visitors, and the public by outlining provincial expectations for the implementation of infection prevention and control (IPC) measures in health authority facilities, programs and services, including outpatient clinics and ambulatory care settings.

#### Definitions

- **Medical mask:** A medical grade face mask that meets American Society for Testing and Materials International (ASTM), International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or equivalent performance requirements for bacterial filtration efficiency, particulate filtration efficiency, fluid resistance, pressure differential, flame spread, skin sensitivity and cytotoxic testing.
- **Must:** A mandatory requirement based on BC Ministry of Health directive.
- **Non-clinical staff:** All health care workers that are not providing clinical care, including, but not limited to, administrative and office staff, facilities staff, contractors and volunteers.
- **Patient care area:** An area within a health care facility (including a contracted facility), hallway or lobby, which is accessible to patients, residents or clients who are there to access care or services. This includes any other location where care is provided, such as home and community care locations (including a client's home). It does not include locations such as administrative areas or private offices which are not generally accessed by patients, residents or clients.
- **Respirator:** A medical grade particulate filtering facepiece authorized by Health Canada, which meets minimum performance certification requirements, including for fit testing, filter efficiency, and breathing resistance (e.g., N95 respirator).
- **Should:** A recommended practice to be implemented at the discretion of the organization or the individual.

## Guiding Considerations

1. This guidance is based on current evidence about the known mechanisms for transmitting viral respiratory illnesses. Specifically, viral respiratory illnesses (e.g., COVID-19 and influenza) are primarily spread by liquid droplets that come from the mouth and nose when a person coughs, sneezes, and sometimes, when a person talks.
2. The use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), including masks, is one part of the hierarchy of infection prevention and exposure control measures for communicable diseases. As such, PPE is supplemental to, and not a replacement for other measures on the hierarchy. These other measures include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Public health measures (Orders from the Provincial Health Officer, testing, isolation).
  - b. Environmental measures (being outdoors, frequent cleaning and disinfection).
  - c. Administrative measures (screening for symptoms and risk factors, appropriate signage, patient scheduling).
  - d. Personal measures (rigorous hand hygiene, respecting personal space, staying home when sick, practicing respiratory etiquette, ensuring immunizations are up to date).

## Policy

1. Long-Term Care, Private Hospitals, Stand Alone Extended Care Hospitals Designated Under the Hospital Act, Seniors' Assisted Living Settings and Provincial Mental Health Facilities.

## Masking:

- Health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff):
  - Regardless of immunization status, all persons working in a patient care area **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth, except when eating and/or drinking.
  - Health care workers **must** wear other PPE where indicated by a point of care risk assessment (PCRA) that considers all occupational risks, including potential viral respiratory illnesses.
  - Access to additional PPE for health care workers, such as respirators, **must** be provided in circumstances where, based on a point of care risk assessment, a health care worker determines there is elevated risk of viral respiratory illness transmission through patient/resident interaction.

- Medical masks in non-patient care areas (e.g., administrative offices) **must** be worn if required by workplace communicable disease safety plans or as directed by a medical health officer.
- Visitors:
  - Patient care areas:
    - Regardless of immunization status, visitors in Long-Term Care, Private Hospitals, Stand Alone Extended Care Hospitals Designated Under the Hospital Act, Seniors' Assisted Living Settings and Provincial Mental Health Facilities **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth in all patient care areas, including communal areas and when participating in indoor group events, celebrations, gatherings and activities, except when eating and/or drinking.
  - Visiting multiple residents:
    - If the purpose of a visit requires visiting directly with more than one resident during a single visit (e.g., spiritual care by a faith leader), the visitor **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth for the duration of the visit.
  - Residents who live in single-bed rooms:
    - Visitors are not required to wear a medical mask when visiting directly with a resident in a single-bed room, in an assisted living unit, or in a common area of the care home/residence when others are not around.
  - Residents who live in multi-bed rooms:
    - Visits with residents who live in multi-bed rooms **must** take place in a separate, private room, wherever possible.
    - If a private room is available, visitors are not required to wear a medical mask during the visit.
    - If a private room is not available and other occupant(s) are present in the multi-bed room while a visit is occurring, visitors **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth for the duration of the visit.
    - Visitors **must** only visit with their loved one(s) in a multi-bed room.
    - Visitors **must** respect the personal space of others in a multi-bed room.
    - Room curtains **must** be drawn closed to divide the room, where available.
- Residents:
  - Regardless of immunization status, residents **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth when directed by a health care

worker.

- In all other circumstances, residents **should** wear a medical mask based on personal choice.

### **Ambassadors:**

- Ambassadors **must** be positioned at the entrances of all health care facilities.
- At a minimum, Ambassadors **must**:
  - Actively screen all visitors for symptoms of viral respiratory illness upon entry.
  - Direct all individuals to perform hand hygiene upon entry.
  - Provide medical masks.

### **Hand Hygiene:**

- Facility operators **must** have alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) available at the entrances to all facilities and at the point-of-care.
- Facility operations **must** post appropriate signage at facility entrances, in washrooms, and in common areas directing people to clean their hands.
- Health care workers **must** perform rigorous hand hygiene in accordance with the four moments of hand hygiene.

### **Immunization:**

- Health care workers **must** meet immunization requirements in accordance with Provincial Health Officer (PHO) Orders and employer policies.
- Proof of vaccination is not required for patients, clients, residents or visitors.

### **Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfection:**

- Facility operations **must** continue enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures in resident rooms, treatment rooms, and at high-touch points.

### **Health Care Worker Illness and Return to Work:**

- Health care workers **must** follow provincial viral respiratory illness exposure and return-to-work guidance, available at <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/Return-to-work-management-exposures-health-care-workers>. This includes self-monitoring for signs and symptoms of illness prior to work and staying home when sick.

### **Visitation:**

- Unless directed by a medical health officer, limits on the number of visitors in Long-Term Care, Private Hospitals, Stand Alone Extended Care Hospitals Designated Under the Hospital Act, Seniors' Assisted Living

Settings and Provincial Mental Health Facilities are not required.

- Unless directed by a medical health officer, COVID-19 testing (e.g., rapid antigen testing) is not required for visitation.

### **Occupancy Limits & Physical Distancing:**

- Unless directed by a medical health officer, occupancy limits and physical distancing are not required as infection prevention and control measures in waiting rooms, meeting rooms, and communal areas.
- Facility operators **must** continue to follow all other mandated occupancy limits and requirements set out in, for example, local fire regulations.

## 2. Other Health Care Facilities and Settings where Health Care is Provided.

### **Masking:**

- Health care workers (clinical and non-clinical staff):
  - Regardless of immunization status, all persons working in a patient care area **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth, except when eating and/or drinking.
  - Health care workers **must** wear other PPE where indicated by a point of care risk assessment (PCRA) that considers all occupational risks, including potential viral respiratory illnesses.
  - Access to additional PPE for health care workers, such as respirators, **must** be provided in circumstances where, based on a point of care risk assessment, a health care worker determines there is elevated risk of viral respiratory illness transmission through patient/resident interaction.
  - Medical masks in non-patient care areas (e.g., administrative offices) **must** be worn if required by workplace communicable disease safety plans or as directed by a medical health officer.
- Visitors:
  - Regardless of immunization status, visitors **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth in all patient care areas.
- Patients:
  - Regardless of immunization status, patients **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth when directed by a health care worker.
  - Patients and the people accompanying them **must** wear a medical mask over their nose and mouth in all emergency departments and waiting rooms.
  - In all other circumstances, patients **should** wear a medical mask based on personal choice.

**Ambassadors:**

- Ambassadors **must** be positioned at the entrances of all health care facilities.
- At a minimum, Ambassadors **must**:
  - Actively screen all visitors for symptoms of viral respiratory illness upon entry.
  - Direct all individuals to perform hand hygiene upon entry.
  - Provide medical masks.

**Hand Hygiene:**

- Facility operators **must** have alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) available at the entrances to all facilities and at the point-of-care.
- Facility operations **must** post appropriate signage at facility entrances, in washrooms, and in common areas directing people to clean their hands.
- Health care workers **must** perform rigorous hand hygiene in accordance with the four moments of hand hygiene.

**Immunization:**

- Health care workers **must** meet immunization requirements in accordance with Provincial Health Officer (PHO) Orders and employer policies.
- Proof of vaccination is not required for patients, clients, residents or visitors.

**Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfection:**

- Facility operations **must** continue enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures in patient rooms, treatment rooms, and at high-touch points.

**Health Care Worker Illness and Return to Work:**

- Health care workers **must** follow provincial viral respiratory illness exposure and return-to-work guidance, available at <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/clinical-resources/covid-19-care/Return-to-work-management-exposures-health-care-workers>. This includes self-monitoring for signs and symptoms of illness prior to work and staying home when sick.

**Visitation:**

- Unless directed by a medical health officer, limits on the number of visitors are not required.
- Unless directed by a medical health officer, COVID-19 testing (e.g., rapid antigen testing) is not required for visitation.

### **Occupancy Limits & Physical Distancing:**

- Unless directed by a medical health officer, occupancy limits and physical distancing are not required as infection prevention and control measures in waiting rooms, emergency departments, meeting rooms, and communal areas.
- Facility operators **must** continue to follow all other mandated occupancy limits and requirements set out in, for example, local fire and safety regulations.

### **Implementation**

- All health care administrators **must** develop guidance materials aligned with this policy to support local implementation.
- Exceptions to the medical masking requirements **must** be allowed for:
  - People under 5 years old.
  - People unable to wear a mask because of a health condition, developmental delay, physical or mental impairment.
  - People unable to put on or remove a mask without help from another person.
  - People communicating with someone with a hearing impairment.
- People who are required to wear a mask and are able to wear a mask, but who choose not to as a matter of preference, are **not** exempt.
- All health care facilities **must** provide medical masks, respirators and other PPE for health care workers, non-clinical staff, patients, residents and visitors where indicated in this policy.