

Amber alert frequently asked questions

The FAQs provide an explanation of when masks need to be worn by HWs, patients, visitors, carers and other people coming into NSW Health facilities.

Health workers

What does our clinical area do if we have a limited number of surgical masks for a short period of time?

All issues related to PPE should be escalated immediately through usual organisational structures. This should be addressed at LHD/SHN PPE Governance Committees.

Chapter 4: Personal Protective Equipment provides guidance on extended or sessional use of PPE. HWs are not expected to complete a task if the PPE required is unavailable. See question below.

Can a HW wear the same surgical mask for multiple patient interactions?

Yes, this is called extended or sessional use of PPE.

If a surgical mask can be worn without pulling it down or removing it, for example to speak, it can be worn for up to four hours. If it is pulled down or removed, it must be discarded immediately, and hand hygiene performed.

If the mask is touched, hand hygiene should be performed immediately. The mask should be removed if it becomes damp or loose.

Extended or sessional use of a mask or respirator and eye protection can be used across different clinical areas if it is not contaminated.

Contamination is likely when providing care for patients with COVID-19 or other infections transmitted via the respiratory route and must be changed prior to entering a different clinical area.

Patient transport or NSW Ambulance (NSWA) HWs who move patients between facilities can wear the same mask for the duration of the transport but must discard and change their mask before the next patient transport. Ensure a comfortable fit if driving a vehicle.

Safe mask use must always be considered.

When in crowded areas of the hospital e.g., eating areas/cafeteria, do HWs need to wear a surgical mask?

Yes, when in communal areas.

Physical distancing, cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene and hand hygiene is always to be practiced.

Masks should be worn if distancing is not possible.

When should HWs wear a P2/N95 respirator?

P2/N95 respirators including eye protection are worn when:

- Providing care for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 /communicable diseases of state or national significance patients
- Providing care for close contact of COVID-19 cases
- Providing care or treatment to a patient with a communicable disease that is spread by the airborne route e.g., Tuberculosis (TB), measles

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Should HWs be wearing masks in safety huddles, meetings, education sessions, family conferences etc. on the ward/other designated area?	<p>Yes, if mask wearing is mandated.</p> <p>HWs to wear surgical mask within clinical area and any communal (patient/visitor) area, on entry to hospitals and in corridors including shared spaces when with any other person. This includes spaces where there is no patient or visitor contact.</p> <p>Decision to conduct face-to-face education sessions should be balanced between need and ability to implement risk mitigation strategies (e.g., risk assessment on the level of transmission in the community, HW symptom screening, the ability to wear masks, physical distance, room capacity, environmental controls).</p>
What should be done if a HW declines to wear a surgical mask when within 1.5m of a patient?	<p>This is a WHS risk and should be managed within this legislation.</p> <p>Surgical masks, like other PPE are provided to protect HWs, patients and visitors. Where masks are prescribed for use, they must be consistently used by HWs and as such are not optional.</p>
Should a HW wear a surgical mask when they are talking to a patient and can maintain a 1.5m physical distance?	<p>Yes, a surgical mask is required within clinical areas and when providing direct care to patients.</p>
During this amber alert, should HWs with conditions that place them in a 'vulnerable' group be redeployed?	<p>Vulnerable HWs should be individually risk assessed to determine their suitability for clinical areas.</p> <p>Wearing a surgical mask when within 1.5m of any patient will reduce this risk and should be considered in the risk assessment.</p>
If a HW is in a non-clinical area or office, should they wear a surgical mask?	<p>Yes, if mask wearing is mandated during amber alert.</p> <p>HWs to wear surgical mask when in healthcare facilities, this includes clinical and non-clinical areas (e.g., on entry, corridors, office spaces).</p> <p>In a shared office space and the office is co-located or part of a health facility, HWs are required to wear a mask unless they are the only person working in the office.</p>
If a HW travels in a shared health vehicle with another HW, do they need to wear a surgical mask?	<p>Yes, surgical mask required for HWs in non-clinical area and shared spaces.</p>
Should a HW wear a surgical mask when they are examining a baby or toddler?	<p>Yes, a baby or toddler will always be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Our protection is for everyone.</p> <p>HWs providing direct care within 1.5m of any patient must wear a surgical mask.</p>
Should HWs entering a school for the provision of a service wear a mask? (e.g., immunisation or school within a health facility)	<p>For school-based programs, the decision to wear a mask should be based on a risk assessment considering the proximity, intensity and duration of contact with children in the school.</p> <p>For schools located within health facilities, HWs are to wear a mask if they are required to provide direct care within 1.5m.</p>

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Patients

When should a patient wear a mask?
(See questions regarding approved cloth masks below)

On arrival to a health facility e.g., Emergency Department (ED), Outpatient Clinic, Birth Suite, Medical Imaging, Pathology.

After they are admitted as an inpatient, patients are required to wear a surgical mask if they leave their room for any reason.

Once a patient is admitted to a clinical area, are they required to wear a surgical mask while they are an inpatient?

Patients will not usually be required to wear a mask once in their room.

If they have acute respiratory symptoms, fever or are suspected or confirmed COVID-19, they are required to wear a surgical mask if they are leaving their room (for example going to the medical imaging department).

If patients are to leave the room and physical distancing is not possible, then they will be asked to wear a surgical mask (**not a respirator**).

Remember: some patients will not be able to tolerate wearing a mask.

When a patient discharged from a health facility (ED or as an inpatient) are they required to wear a mask?

Yes, while in the health facility (surgical or approved own approved cloth mask).

What should be done when a patient does not want to wear a mask on arrival (and is not confused or have cognitive impairment or other conditions that might cause difficulty with mask wearing)?

Check the reasons for declining to wear a mask and determine if there are alternatives that may be suitable for this patient.

If they continue to decline the alternative, the patient should be placed 1.5m away from other patients and informed that they are not to walk around the clinical area until they are either discharged from the ED or admitted to their clinical area.

Be mindful of the practicalities of wearing a mask for certain patient groups e.g., those with behavioural disorders or mental health conditions, cognitive impairment.

Women in labour may find mask wearing difficult and may be unable to comply.

Where there are no obvious barriers to mask-wearing, the patient should be informed of the current amber alert recommendations and their risk for COVID-19.

Why don't children 12 years and under need to wear a mask?

In general, it is not practical for children to be fitted with a mask. There appears to be limited transmission of COVID-19 from children to adults.

Parents/guardians are expected to wear a mask and to assist children in this age group with hand hygiene.

If a child is wearing a mask, then this can continue while the child is inside a health facility.

Masks can be choking hazards for children under two years; therefore, masks are not suitable for this age group.

This advice is consistent with other jurisdictions.

Can a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 wear a P2/N95 respirator?

Patients should not wear a P2/N95 respirator but may be asked to wear a surgical mask when in a shared space.

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Approved cloth masks

Can a HW wear an approved cloth mask at work?

No, approved cloth masks vary in quality, effectiveness and may not be fluid resistant. This means they will not prevent blood, body fluids and respiratory particles penetrating the mask.

In proven incidents of sensitivity/allergy a cloth mask may be used as a primary layer to a surgical mask (this must be discussed with local IPAC).

An approved cloth mask can be worn by HWs outside the health facility e.g., travelling to and from work.

If a visitor comes in wearing an approved cloth mask, should it be changed to a surgical mask?

No, a visitor can wear an approved cloth mask while visiting the health facility.

If the visitor can wear the approved cloth mask without discomfort, they should continue to wear it.

Reminders regarding hand hygiene, physical distancing, avoiding touching their mask and cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene are to be provided.

If the visitor has acute respiratory symptoms or fever, they need to defer their visit and have COVID-19 testing. They should be asked to change to a surgical mask.

If a patient/client, without any COVID-19 symptoms, comes in wearing an approved cloth mask, should it be changed to a surgical mask?

No, if the patient/client can wear the approved cloth mask without discomfort, they should continue to wear it.

Reminders regarding hand hygiene, physical distancing, avoiding touching their mask, cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene are to be provided.

If a patient/client, with an ARI or COVID-19 symptoms, comes in wearing an approved cloth mask, should it be changed to a surgical mask?

Yes, an approved cloth mask will become damp very quickly when someone has an ARI, fever or COVID-19 symptoms.

The mask will be much less effective when damp and may be touched frequently by the patient.

A surgical mask should be placed on the patient and usual admission/discharge processes for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients are to be followed.

Reminders regarding hand hygiene, physical distancing, avoiding touching their mask, cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene are to be provided.

Access to tissues, ABHR and a bin is to be provided.

If a member of the community wears a towel, scarf, tea towel etc. into the health facility, is this classified as a 'approved cloth mask'?

No, these are not classified as approved cloth masks.

NSW Health has released [general guidance for approved cloth masks](#), this information should be followed.

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Home visits

Do HWs need to wear a surgical mask when they are visiting a patient in their home to provide healthcare?

Yes, a surgical mask and eye protection should be worn if providing care within 1.5m.

Wear a P2/N95 respirator and eye protection if the patient suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

If physical distancing can be maintained during the visit, a surgical mask is not required.

Patients are not required to wear a mask but may choose to wear one.

Carer in a healthcare setting

Should a carer wear a surgical face mask if within 1.5m of a patient?

Yes, they can also wear an approved cloth mask.

If a carer is accompanying a patient/client into a healthcare facility, they should wear a mask (surgical or approved cloth mask).

Visitors

Are visitors required to wear a mask if they come to a health facility?

Yes, visitors are required to wear a mask if they are coming into a health facility for any reason.

If they are already wearing an approved cloth or surgical mask, they can continue to wear this. See section above on approved cloth masks.

Birthing room

If a partner or family member from the same household is supporting the woman during labour, do they need to wear a mask when they are in the room?

If the patient is in a single room, a mask is not required.

When the visitor leaves the room, they are to wear a mask until they leave the hospital as per the current risk framework.

During labour the partner would carry the same risk as the patient and therefore would not be required to routinely wear a mask.

However, in the event of participants in care is COVID-19 positive (or communicable disease of state or national significance) or a close contact they will need to wear a mask at all times.

What should be done if a visitor declines to wear a mask?

The visitor should be informed of the current amber alert recommendations and the risk to the patient, themselves and others in the facility they are visiting.

If they continue to decline to wear a mask, they should be risk assessed to determine the location of their visit and the patient they are visiting.

Offer an alternative such as a virtual visit.

They should only be asked to leave the health facility if it is determined that there will be a COVID-19 or communicable disease of state or national significance risk for the patient, themselves or to the clinical area they will be visiting.

Who will teach visitors how to wear a mask?

As visitors are screened at entry areas, HWs who are responsible for these areas should provide assistance on the correct mask use.

Posters and information on mask use are available [here](#).

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Aged care facilities (ACF) / Multi-purpose service (MPS)

In an NSW Health operated ACF/ MPS, do these rules for mask wearing apply to HWs?

Yes, HWs who work in ACFs should take extra precautions including the use of masks where there are areas for increased testing see [NSW Health advice for RACFs](#) for more detailed information. This includes aged care areas within an MPS.

An ACF can recommend the wearing of surgical masks by HWs within 1.5m of residents. Approved cloth masks are not recommended for HWs.

Does a resident in an ACF or MPS need to wear a surgical mask?

No, this is classified as their home.

Patients with a disability, cognitive impairment, behavioural issues AND/OR mental health conditions

Should a HW/carer/visitor wear a surgical mask if within 1.5m of a patient?

If possible. P2/N95 respirator is recommended for HWs when providing care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 or communicable disease of state or national significance.

HWs, visitors and/or carers wearing a respirator, or a surgical mask may cause some patients distress or trigger changes to their behaviour or mental health condition. This will require a risk assessment and ongoing monitoring to determine the best way to manage the risk of transmission of COVID-19 when providing care within 1.5m of the patient. If a risk assessment determines that a mask will pose a physical risk to the patient, alternatives such as physical distancing and full-face shield should be considered. The risk assessment should determine the appropriate PPE for the HW.

All decisions regarding the risk assessment should be documented in the patients' healthcare record.

Volunteers in a healthcare setting

Are volunteers required to wear a mask?

Yes, volunteers are required to wear a mask if they are coming into a health facility.

Volunteers should not be within 1.5m of patients suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

A risk assessment of vulnerable volunteers should be conducted based on community transmission case locations.

Volunteers should not be interacting with patients with an ARI or suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Contractors

When should a contractor wear a surgical mask?

Contractors are required to wear a mask if they are coming into a health facility.

It is expected that contractors maintain adequate supplies of PPE and ABHR as part of their WHS obligations.

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If a cafeteria is located within a health facility (contracted by the LHD/SHN), should the HW wear a mask when interacting with patients, HWs and visitors?

Yes, mask is required when interacting with patients, HWs and visitors.

Stock delivery to clinical areas – external delivery/courier companies

Do delivery/courier driver need to wear a mask (surgical or cloth) if they are making a delivery to clinical areas?

Yes, masks and ABHR should be made available to delivery/courier driver if they do not have their own approved cloth mask.

Valve masks

If a patient or a visitor is wearing a mask with a valve, do we need to change it to a surgical mask?

Yes, these masks should be changed.

These masks should not be worn as the exhalation valve is generally not filtered and particles are able to be exhaled via the valve.

Reminder: Not to be onsite if you have acute respiratory symptoms or fever. Continue to perform hand hygiene, physical distancing, avoid touching masks, encourage cough etiquette and respiratory hygiene.