

# Red 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 or P2/N95 respirators 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 mask or P2/N95 respirator for multiple patient interactions?**

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

If a P2/N95 respirator can be worn without pulling it down or removing it for example, to speak, drink or eat, it can be worn for up to 8 hours continuously; 4 hours for a surgical mask. If it is pulled down or removed, it must be discarded immediately, and hand hygiene performed. HWs need to be allowed to take breaks so 4 hours is the maximum period of continuous wear that is recommended.

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

Extended or sessional use of a mask or respirator 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 HWs who move patients between facilities can wear the same mask/respirator 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/respirator 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, universal mask use applies during red alert.

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

# Red alert frequently asked questions

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| <b>Can HWs wear a P2/N95 respirator for routine care of the patient?</b>   | <p>Yes, P2/N95 respirators and eye protection are indicated for routine care of patients during red alert as per airborne precautions.</p> <p>Airborne precautions (includes the use of a P2/N95 respirator and eye protection) are required when caring for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suspected or confirmed COVID-19/communicable diseases of state or national significance patients</li><li>• Close contact of a COVID-19 case</li><li>• Patient with a communicable disease that is spread by the airborne route e.g., Tuberculosis (TB), Measles</li></ul> |
| <b>Should HWs be wearing masks in safety huddles, meetings, family conferences etc. on the ward/other designated area?</b> | <p>Yes, universal mask use applies during red alert. Physical distancing also applies.</p>  |
| <b>What should be done if a HW declines to wear a surgical mask/respirator during red alert?</b>                           | <p>This is a WHS risk and should be managed within this legislation.</p> <p>Surgical masks/respirators, like other PPE are provided to protect HWs, patients and visitors.</p> <p>Where masks/respirators are prescribed for use and risk assessed as required, they must be consistently used by HWs and as such are not optional.</p>   |
| <b>Should a HW wear a surgical mask when they are talking to a patient and can maintain a 1.5m physical distance?</b>      | <p>Yes, All HWs are required to wear a surgical mask for all patient/client care during red alert.</p> <p>Airborne precautions (includes the use of a P2/N95 respirator and eye protection) are required when caring for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• suspected or confirmed COVID-19/communicable diseases of state or national significance patients</li><li>• close contact of a COVID-19 case</li><li>• patient with a communicable disease that is spread by the airborne route e.g., Tuberculosis (TB), Measles</li></ul>                                     |
| <b>During red alert, should HWs with conditions that place them in a 'vulnerable' group be redeployed?</b>                 | <p>Vulnerable HWs should be individually risk assessed to determine their suitability for clinical areas.</p> <p>Wearing a surgical mask or P2/N95 respirator as required during patient care will reduce this risk and should be considered in the risk assessment.</p>  |
| <b>If a HW is in a non-clinical area or office, should they wear a surgical mask?</b>                                      | <p>Yes, universal surgical mask use is required during red alert.</p> <p>Physical distancing, cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene and hand hygiene are always to be practiced.</p>   |
| <b>If a HW travels in a shared health vehicle with another HW, do they need to wear a surgical mask?</b>                   | <p>Yes, universal surgical mask use is required during red alert.</p>   |

# Red alert frequently asked questions

**Should a HW wear a surgical mask when they are examining a baby or toddler?**

Yes, a baby or toddler will always be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Our protection is for everyone.

HWs providing direct care of any patient must wear a surgical mask.

**Should HWs entering a school for the provision of a service wear a mask? (e.g., immunisation or school within a health facility)**

Yes. Restrictions for attending may apply based on risk assessment.

For school-based programs, the decision to attend even when wearing a mask should be based on a risk assessment considering the proximity, intensity and duration of contact with children in the school.

For schools located within health facilities, HWs are to wear a mask.

## 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, Outpatient Clinic, Birth Suite, Medical Imaging, Pathology.

After they are admitted as an inpatient, patients are required to wear a surgical mask when in shared rooms or if they leave their room for any reason and does not affect their clinical care.

**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 in a single 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**).

Patients that are cohorted in open spaces (avoid where able) may be recommended to wear a surgical mask while in this area.

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

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

Yes, while transiting through the health facility (surgical 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/clients 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 but it is strongly recommended during red alert.

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

# Red alert frequently asked questions

**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.

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.

Surgical masks provide source control by the patient when wearing.

## Approved cloth masks

**Can a HW wear an approved cloth mask at work?**

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

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 or appropriate ARI testing. They should be asked to change to a surgical mask.

**If a patient/client, without any ARI, 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 an [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 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 approved cloth 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 / infectious disease 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.

# Red alert frequently asked questions

**If a member of the community wears a towel, scarf, tea towel etc. into the health facility, is this classified as an '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.

## 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 should be worn when providing care in the home.

Wear a P2/N95 respirator and eye protection when providing care to patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Patients are also recommended to wear a mask during visit where able.

## Carer in a healthcare setting

**Should a carer wear a surgical face mask?**

Yes, they can also wear an approved cloth mask.

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

## Visitors

Also refer to Section 3.16 - Supporting visitor access during red alert - in the Infection Prevention and Control Manual: COVID-19 and other acute Respiratory Infections

**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 mask (as per NSW Health criteria) or surgical mask, they can continue to wear this. See section above on approved cloth masks.

Reduce visitors to essential only and follow local procedures.

## Birth 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 patient's room?**

A mask is recommended for the mother and any support person(s).

When the visitor leaves the room, they are to wear a mask until they leave the hospital as per the red alert risk level.

Also refer to *Section 3.16 Supporting visitor access during red alert*.

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

The visitor should be informed of the current red 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.

**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 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.

P2/N95 respirator and eye protection is recommended for HWs when providing care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

Visitors, including any children may require an exemption to visit.

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

Risk assess.

Focus should be on separation, segregation, and isolation. All HWs to wear appropriate PPE.

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

**Should a HW/carer/visitor wear a surgical mask?**

Yes. P2/N95 respirator and eye protection is recommended for HWs when providing care for patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

HWs, visitors and/or carers wearing a P2/N95 respirator or a surgical mask (and eye protection) 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 or communicable disease of state or national significance when providing care during red alert. 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?**

Volunteers may be restricted during red alert.

If a volunteer provides support or assistance in the facility, they are required to wear a surgical mask (this includes administrative areas).

Reminders regarding hand hygiene, physical distancing, cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene and not coming to the facility if unwell are to be provided.

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 or communicable disease of state or national significance.

# Red alert frequently asked questions

## Contractors

**When should a contractor wear a surgical mask?**

They are required to wear a mask when they enter the facility.

Universal surgical mask use will be in place during red alert.

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

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

**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. Universal mask use (surgical or [approved cloth mask](#)) is required.

## Stock delivery to clinical areas – external delivery/courier companies

**Do delivery/courier driver need to wear a mask (surgical or own 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.

Reminders regarding hand hygiene, physical distancing, cough etiquette, respiratory hygiene and not being onsite if they have acute respiratory symptoms or fever.

## 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