

PHYSICAL DISTANCING AT WORK AND THE USE OF MASKS



Updated: June 5, 2020

Safe recovery planning is well underway across Island Health. As part of this work, we are working closely with WorkSafeBC, our Occupational Health and Safety team, JOHSC committees and operational teams to ensure that recovery of services is built on a foundation that enables safe work spaces for all Island Health staff, physicians and volunteers.

As we move into this next phase of recovering our services, we ask that when you are in any Island Health Facility for work, and you need to wear a mask to decrease the risk of transmission of infection, that you wear a medical-grade mask. In non-patient care areas, where you can consistently maintain a distance of 2 meters from your co-workers, you are not required to put on a mask. If you have to pass your co-workers briefly (i.e. to walk to the printer), let your co-worker know you will be walking past and then turn your head away when doing so.

WorkSafeBC has provided us with an approach that focuses on the hierarchy of controls available to us to ensure safety in the work place, particularly while we continue to live with COVID-19:

1. Physical distancing is the first and most important control that we have for ensuring we aren't transmitting COVID-19 in our work spaces. Therefore, as you do your work, or come back to the work place after being away, we are asking you to do whatever is possible to maintain 2 meters between yourself and your colleagues.
2. Where you are unable to maintain physical distance, sites have been busy putting physical barriers in place (i.e. solid plexiglass and other partitions), to ensure droplets can't be spread. We are also asking that when possible, you use administrative barriers, like scheduling people who work in a shared space on alternating days or continuing to work from home as able.
3. Lastly, when these or other options aren't available, we ask that you wear a medical-grade mask to decrease the risk of transmission between coworkers.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

UPDATED RESPONSE: Do patients who come into ambulatory care for treatment/ procedures and cannot keep 2m distance with employee/other patients, require a mask?

- 1) *At this time, we are not asking asymptomatic clients/patients to wear a mask.*
- 2) *If a client/patient requests a mask, please provide them with a mask.*
- 3) *In keeping with WorkSafeBC requirements, staff should continue physical distancing whenever possible. When unable to maintain 2 meters distance, or create a physical barrier, staff are required to wear a mask.*
- 4) *It is important to physically distance or put a barrier between patients who can't be 2m apart.*

Why?

- *Patients are being screened for risk of COVID-19 (numerous times in some cases).*
- *The risk of asymptomatic transmission is extremely low.*
- *Staff wearing a mask provides protection for both patient and staff from large droplet transmission.*

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How will we define areas where it's difficult to physically distance?

Any time that you cannot maintain 2 meters between yourself and someone else, there are no physical barriers in place, and administrative barriers aren't an option, staff will be expected to wear a mask.

Does it make sense as a blanket policy, even with a very low viral incidence in this area?

We remain vigilant to the risk of introducing COVID-19 into our worksites, despite the current low incidence in BC. It is a WorkSafeBC directive to ensure work environments are safe for all staff as we begin to implement recovery plans, and we are following these requirements.

Do we have any evidence of staff-to-staff transmission at this point?

The recent outbreak at Abbotsford Hospital derived from staff-to-staff transmission, and there have been other cases in BC of staff-to-staff transmission, particularly in LTC.

Are we able to supply all staff who require them with face masks?

We are currently able to supply procedure/medical-grade masks for staff to ensure their safety. We continue to work with the province around the availability and use of non-medical-grade masks in non-clinical areas and decisions on this will be forthcoming.

Who will be the arbiter if there are any doubts about whether to wear a mask?

If there are doubts, staff should err on the side of caution and wear a mask. Because this is a WorkSafeBC requirement, it will be followed up through workplace inspections and notices.

Are staff required to wear the surgical masks or are homemade masks appropriate?

At this time, we will be providing medical-grade masks for all masking requirements within Island Health.

Do we have adequate PPE stocks for this, anticipating our usage will increase?

Yes. We currently have adequate PPE stocks for our usage.

If staff need the mask, will visors be mandatory – or are eye mucous membranes less of a concern?

Masking fundamentally serves to protect others from ourselves, and so at this point, visors are not mandatory.

What are the long-term implications of wearing a mask?

The continuous, extended and repetitive use of personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks, gloves and safety glasses/goggles, may cause adverse skin reactions. Please see: [Prevention & Treatment Recommendations PPE Skin Injury](#)

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Would this include break rooms, and what do we do while eating?

This applies to all areas you are required to be in to do your role within Island Health. When eating, we ask that you find the space to distance from colleagues while your mask is off.

The new masks are very difficult to breathe in and staff cannot tolerate prolonged use.

Prolonged mask use can decrease the ability to easily breathe. This may be a sign that the mask has become saturated and should be changed.

How do we accommodate staff who cannot tolerate prolonged mask wear (skin breakdown, asthma etc)?

Staff accommodations are done on case-by-case basis, informed by medical and/or risk factors unique to the individual and their work requirements. These may include minimizing risk of exposure to COVID-19 via other PPE solutions, and/or temporarily reassigned duties or work locations where possible.

What are the expectations around enforcement?

Leaders are responsible for the health and safety of their staff and to ensure WorkSafeBC requirements are being followed. The first step is always to enter into dialogue to ensure understanding of the requirement (an employer requirement). Leaders requiring assistance can consult with HR.

Can staff wear just a visor instead of a mask if this is better tolerated?

No. There are currently no evidence-based studies on the safety of a face shield over a mask in reducing the risk of COVID-19 acquisition or transmission.

Are masks really effective for prolonged use? How long is a mask 'good for'?

A mask is good until it is damp or dirty. Typically, we plan for four (4) mask changes a day. In non-clinical areas, a mask should last longer than in clinical areas. Staff should also remove their mask after they have been providing care to a patient/client/resident on droplet and contact precautions, because of the likelihood of surface contamination.

What will we be promoting around team safety culture (vs. WorkSafeBC/Island Health mandate) to enhance compliance?

Our role as a team member is to ensure that we are keeping ourselves and our colleagues safe. This is a foundation we need to have in order to provide safe patient care for all patients.

Masks need to be available in most worksites. How will masks be requested and supplied to non-clinical areas?

We have worked through the best way possible to supply all areas with masks in the most efficient way. IF you are unable to access masks in your work place, please contact your leader.

In non-clinical areas, does it have to be a surgical mask or can it be a home made mask?

At this time, we will be providing medical-grade masks for all masking requirements within Island Health.

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What are Island Health's plans to address IH workplaces that have no plan or current practice for physical distancing, wearing masks or regular cleaning?

At this point in time, all sites are expected to have a plan in place, or be actively working on plan, to ensure physical distancing and infection prevention requirements are being followed. Staff can speak with their leaders or Island Health's infection, prevention and control office for information and support.