



RESPIRATORY and EYE PROTECTION at work

Safeguards for workers confronting COVID-19?

(Non-health care workplaces)

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is believed to be spread by:

- ◆ inhaling respiratory droplets generated by an infected person through coughing or sneezing (which many experts say is the primary source of virus transmission), and
- ◆ touching a person or object with the virus on it, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing or sanitizing your hands.

Public health experts agree the **first line of defense** against COVID-19 is **social distancing** (at least two metre distance from anyone). Also essential is **personal and environmental hygiene**, including:

- ◆ cleaning all surfaces, most importantly commonly touched surfaces, and
- ◆ washing hands thoroughly with soap and water, or if this is not available, use of hand sanitizers (at least 60 per cent alcohol).

However, for many still required to work during this crisis, social distancing can be a challenge. This challenge certainly applies to health care workers interacting closely with suspected, presumed or confirmed COVID-19 patients. Included in the list of their essential needs is access to a range of personal protective equipment, including equipment for respiratory and eye protection.

ADVICE ON THE LIMITATIONS OF RESPIRATORY AND EYE PROTECTION

For workers working in non-health care settings though, in most instances, these protections are not necessary. Quite simply, most workers do not have the same exposures as their counterparts in health care.

The Public Health Agency of Canada says, “**The use of respirators (e.g., N-95 respirators) are not recommended, except in healthcare settings when particular high risk procedures are being performed or in other industries when respirators are routinely used. Workers who are exposed to people who are ill with respiratory symptoms, such as coughing and sneezing, may use face masks and eye protection if the nature of their work warrants it.**”

Many non-health care workers deemed essential during this crisis, want facemasks and face shields. Many come into contact with the public and co-workers. They argue, they have no way of knowing whether the people they are coming into contact with are infected with the COVID-19 virus. In these instances, workers should raise their concerns with a worker member of the joint health and safety committee, their worker representative, or a union representative if they have one.

It is important to understand though, respiratory protection like **facemasks offer limited protection.**

According to the U.S. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, “Facemasks are loose-fitting and provide only barrier protection against droplets, including large respiratory particles. ... Most facemasks do not effectively filter small particles from the air and do not prevent leakage around the edge of the mask when the user inhales.”

Meantime, the World Health Organization says what protection masks afford is effective “only when used in combination with frequent hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.” In fact, **improper use can increase risk of infection**, as people can unintentionally touch their face with contaminated hands while adjusting the mask.

ADVICE FOR PROPER/SAFE USE OF RESPIRATORY AND EYE PROTECTION

For all these reasons, using respiratory and eye protection against COVID-19 in non-health care work can provide a **false sense of security**. If they are to be used, they **must be used properly**. This cannot be emphasized enough.

If using a mask:

- ◆ prior to putting it on, **clean hands with soap and water or sanitizer**
- ◆ inspect for holes or tears
- ◆ identify the top (i.e., for surgical mask this means the side with a metal piece)
- ◆ identify the inside
- ◆ place mask on face, elastic over ears and form to face over nose, mouth, cheeks and chin (ensure no gaps, as best as possible)
- ◆ do not touch the front of mask during use (if you do touch it, clean/sanitize hands)
- ◆ replace mask if it becomes damp immediately
- ◆ to remove
 - ◇ grasp by elastics and move away from the face,
 - ◇ discard immediately in an enclosed bin
 - ◇ **clean/sanitize hands**
- ◆ don't reuse single-use masks.

N.B. The World Health Organization also provides a handy video for safe mask use. Check it out [here](#).

For those workers using face shields or goggles, like facemasks proper use precautions are also in order, otherwise they risk infection for similar reasons.

If using eye protection, Public Health Agency of Canada recommends:

- ◆ Eye protection should be worn over prescription eyeglasses (Prescription eyeglasses alone are not adequate protection against respiratory droplets.)
- ◆ Protective eye wear should be put on after putting on a mask
- ◆ After applying eye protection, [If using gloves, which are only recommended when caring at home for persons under investigation of COVID-19 and not in work settings outside of health care,] gloves should be put on
- ◆ To remove eye protection, first remove gloves and perform hand hygiene. Then remove the eye protection by handling the arms of goggles or side or back of face shield. The front of the goggles or face shield is considered contaminated.
- ◆ Discard the eye protection into a plastic lined waste container. If the eye protection is not intended for single use, clean it with soap and water and then disinfect it with a store bought disinfectant, or if not available, a diluted bleach solution (0.5% sodium hypochlorite), being mindful not to contaminate the environment with the eye protection.
- ◆ **Perform hand hygiene.**

PLEASE NOTE: As with gloves at work, there are instances where workers are required to wear respiratory and eye protection to protect against workplace hazards other than COVID-19. In these instances, much of the above advice applies, especially as it applies to goggles and face shields. For respiratory protection what you use depends on the hazard. But the general principles apply: wash your hands thoroughly before putting on protection; do not touch the front of mask/respirator during use (if you do touch it with your hands, clean/sanitize your hands); and wash your hands once you have removed the mask/respirator. All other care and use instructions apply.

Additional advice from Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development

OVERVIEW

Employers and constructors have obligations to protect workers from hazards in the workplace as set out in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and its regulations and the directives coming from the Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Workers should raise any concerns to their:

- supervisor
- joint health and safety committee
- health and safety representative.

This will help ensure the employer has taken all reasonable precautions.

Ontario is currently in the midst of a global pandemic. While the COVID-19 situation is changing rapidly, the legislation and regulations used to govern Ontario's workplaces are not.

Under Ontario law, employers have the duty to keep workers, work sites and all workplaces safe and free of hazards. Workers have the right to refuse unsafe work. If health and safety concerns are not resolved internally, a worker can seek enforcement of their rights with the ministry's Health and Safety Contact Centre at 1-877-202-0008. Failure of the employer or constructor to comply with the OHSA and its regulations could result in a stop-work order upon inspection by the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development.

BEST PRACTICES

These are covered in the Workers Health & Safety Centre document above. Other WHSC COVID-19 resources found at www.whsc.on.ca.

For more information on worker's rights and employer obligations under health and safety law, including the worker right to refuse unsafe work, check out Workers Health & Safety Centre [online worker OHS rights posters](#) or the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) section of the WHSC website.

RESOURCES

Stay updated with daily government updates on COVID-19:

[Government of Ontario](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[Public Health Ontario](#).