Respirator Use to Prevent COVID-19 During Health Care Staff Shortages

Attention: Employers with employees working in hospitals, clinics, long-term care or other health care facilities

Increased Risk for COVID-19

Due to a shortage of staff working in health care facilities, employees infected with COVID-19 are returning to work while possibly contagious. This increases the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

Respirator Requirements and Recommendations

The L&I Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) requires fit-tested respirators be used by any employee who enters the room of a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

DOSH recommends, but does not require, fit-tested respirators be used by employees who work in proximity to co-workers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

A full respirator program, including fit testing, is required when employers require employees to use respirators as personal protective equipment (PPE) — whether or not DOSH requires such use.

Hospitals, including those following crisis or contingency staffing strategies, must continue to use respirators and other PPE according to a conventional capacity strategy per state proclamation 20-24.3 (Jan. 13, 2022).

Respirators — The Safest Alternative

Respirators are tested and regulated to ensure a reliably high level of protection to wearers — much higher than facemasks (e.g., surgical or medical procedure masks) and face coverings. In addition:

- Studies indicate that N95s perform at least as well as surgical masks for use as a source control, even with an exhalation valve.
- Respirators provide a more complete seal around the wearer’s mouth and nose than a facemask or cloth face covering. The adequacy of the seal can be verified by fit testing the respirator; which is something that cannot be done for facemasks.
- Surgical N95s (with FDA approval) are available as a source control or as PPE for tasks where protection from liquid splashes is indicated.

Voluntary Use


Fit-testing isn’t required for voluntary use, but it is recommended to optimize protection.

Respirators as Source Control

When an employer decides certain employees (e.g. an employee potentially infected with COVID-19) must use an N95 or other respirator solely for source control (i.e., worn to protect others) all of the following apply:

* See NIOSH publication No. 2021-107 at www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2021-107. Also, respirators with exhalation valves should not be used in clinical settings where a sterile field must be maintained.
Employers can consider use as voluntary under Chapter 296-842 WAC, The Respirator Rule.  
https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=296-842

A reduced respirator program is required (e.g., for N95 use this is limited to providing a copy of Table 2 from the Respirator rule) and the employer must ensure use doesn’t create a health or safety hazard.

The employer must document the respirator is used only for source control (if the respirator isn’t fit-tested).

Fit-testing is encouraged, not required.

Get help from L&I

L&I COVID-19 Safety webpage
www.Lni.wa.gov/COVIDSafety

Contact L&I
Email EyeOnSafety@Lni.wa.gov, or call 1-800-423-7233.

Consultation Program
L&I provides consultations, training, and technical assistance at no cost to employers. Get more information and schedule a free confidential consultation at www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants.

This alert is intended to bring awareness to potential safety and health hazards in the workplace. 
*It is not a rule and creates no new legal obligations.* L&I recommends employers and workers review the safety and health rules for specific requirements at www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules.

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