



The appropriate use of personal protective equipment for coronavirus (COVID-19) in the work environment

Frequently asked questions

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This document provides guidance on best practice to slow the spread of coronavirus within the work environment for services outside of the health and aged care systems, including the appropriate use of personal protective equipment (also known as PPE).

All services are encouraged to review this guidance and implement appropriate measures in their workplaces. This guidance is based on the most current advice of the World Health Organisation and Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, and will be reviewed and updated if international advice changes. Please ensure you are viewing the most up to date version – [Department of Health and Human Services – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](http://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au) <www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au>.

Context

A number of directions have been made by the Victorian Chief Health Officer and Victorian Government to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). These directions intend to keep all Victorians healthy and safe.

Restrictions of activities and venues across the State do not currently prevent some industries from continuing to operate. For further advice and the latest information, please refer to [Department of Health and Human Services – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](http://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au) <www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au>.

Frequently asked questions

Do I need to use personal protective equipment at work during the coronavirus (COVID_19) emergency?

It is important that all workforces are able to undertake their duties in a safe manner during this time and slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Due to the global demand for personal protective equipment, it is vitally important this equipment is used in the appropriate circumstances to maintain adequate supply of key items for our frontline healthcare workers.

According to the advice of the World Health Organisation and Australian Government, the use of personal protective equipment such as surgical masks in the community is only helpful in preventing people who have coronavirus (COVID-19) from spreading it to others.

Personal protective equipment is a protection of last resort, and should only be used by people in certain situations. This is because the most effective prevention measures against coronavirus (COVID-19) are:

- washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- if you cannot access hand washing facilities, using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with at least 60 per cent alcohol
- avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- practicing respiratory hygiene by coughing or sneezing into your elbow or upper sleeve, or a tissue and then immediately disposing of the tissue.
- maintaining physical distance of at least 1.5 metres between yourself and other people.

In the workplace, physical distancing of 1.5 metres between staff and clients is to be implemented wherever possible. In an enclosed space there should be on average no more than one person per four square metres of floor space. People are directed to work from home where possible.

Where it is not reasonably practical to work from home or to physically distance from others while working, the length of time that staff and clients spend in close proximity is to be reduced.

If these preventative measures are effectively undertaken, the use of personal protective equipment (such as face masks or single use gloves) is unlikely to be required.

What should I do if I feel unwell?

If you feel unwell, do not go to work.

If you are experiencing flu-like symptoms, regardless of if you have travelled overseas or had close contact with a confirmed case of coronavirus (COVID-19), you must:

- not attend work
- contact your employer for further advice
- seek advice through the dedicated coronavirus (COVID-19) hotline on 1800 675 389. This hotline is serviced by Nurse-on-Call. Please keep Triple Zero (000) for emergencies.

How can I best protect myself from coronavirus (COVID-19) at work?

The most effective prevention measures against coronavirus (COVID-19) transmission, whether you are able to work remotely or not, are:

- washing your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds
- if you cannot access hand washing facilities, using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with at least 60 per cent alcohol
- avoiding touching your eyes, nose and mouth

- practicing respiratory hygiene by coughing or sneezing into your elbow or upper sleeve, or tissue and then immediately disposing of the tissue
- maintaining physical distance of at least 1.5 metres between yourself and other people
- cleaning and disinfecting high touch surfaces regularly, including phones, keyboards, door handles, light switches, bench tops etc.

If these preventative measures are effectively undertaken, the use of personal protective equipment (such as face masks or single use gloves) is unlikely to be required.

In my job I am able to maintain a physical distance of at least 1.5 metres from other staff and clients at all times – do I require personal protective equipment?

No. Maintaining a physical distance of at least 1.5 metres from other people, combined with washing your hands frequently, are the most effective preventative measures you can take. Regular cleaning of high touch surfaces such as desks, phones and keyboards should also occur.

Wearing any personal protective equipment items, such as gloves or masks, is not recommended in these circumstances.

- For example, customer service staff maintaining appropriate physical distance do not need to wear a mask as there is less chance they will come into close contact with someone suspected or confirmed to have coronavirus (COVID-19). All staff are required to practice physical distancing and good hygiene practices.

The use of personal protective equipment items by people who do not require them is impacting the availability of these items for our health care workers, who vitally need them in order to care for people with coronavirus (COVID-19).

My job requires me to maintain close contact with another person for short periods at a time – do I require personal protective equipment?

Not necessarily.

If you need to be in close contact with another person who is healthy and well in the course of your work duties for periods of less than 15 minutes, it is recommended that you do not require personal protective equipment.

If your Department or Agency has developed guidelines and procedures specific to your work you should refer to them in the first instance.

If you are required to work in a group of two or more people, all members of the group should physically distance from each other as much as possible, and limit the amount of time spent in close proximity. In these circumstances, the members of the group do not require personal protective equipment.

If you are required to be in close proximity with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19) in the course of your work duties (i.e. if you are providing direct care for someone in a residential facility), then the use of a surgical mask and eye protection is appropriate. Further guidance on the use of personal protective equipment for carers and health care professionals can be found at [Physical distancing and other transmission reduction measures – coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-transmission-reduction-measures) <<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-transmission-reduction-measures>>.

My job requires me to maintain close contact with another person for prolonged periods of time – do I require personal protective equipment?

If your Department or Agency has developed guidelines and procedures specific to your work you should refer to them in the first instance.

Each workplace should ensure that all possible steps have been taken to remove the need for more than one person to be in the same physical space as another at any one time. In line with the directive made by the Victorian

Chief Health Officer, there should be on average no more than one person per four square metres of floor space in an enclosed space.

In small indoor environments, undertaking all of the primary prevention measures is even more important, such as frequently washing your hands, coughing or sneezing into your elbow, and cleaning high touch and common surfaces regularly. You should also try to enable physical distancing as often as possible during a shift, and open windows or adjust air conditioning to enhance airflow. If you are implementing all of these preventative measures, you should not require personal protective equipment.

If you are required to care for someone who has tested positive for coronavirus in your work, the use of a surgical mask and eye protection is recommended.

Should I be wearing a P2/N95 mask to protect myself at work?

No. If you are not a health care worker, you do not require a P2/N95 face mask – unless your Department or Agency has developed guidelines and procedures specific to your work, in which case you should refer to them in the first instance.

According to advice from the World Health Organisation, the only people who need to wear a P2/N95 respirator mask are health care professionals who are undertaking aerosol-generating procedures. For all other people and in all other situations, a surgical mask is appropriate if the use of a face mask is required.

For people with no respiratory symptoms and who are able to practice physical distancing and hygiene precautions in their work, wearing a mask of any kind is not recommended. Hand hygiene practices are the most important method to reduce infection risk.

Using P2/N95 face masks when they aren't necessary will impact the availability of these masks for our health care workers, who need them in order to care for people with coronavirus (COVID-19).

If your organisation has supplies of P2/N95 masks that are not required for regular operational purposes, these should be made available to the health system. Please contact your relevant Victorian Public Service department to discuss this further.

Where can I find out more information?

For Victorian updates to the current incident, go to [Department of Health and Human Services – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](http://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au) <www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au>

For national updates go to [Australian Government Department of Health – Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) health alert](http://health.gov.au/news/latest-information-about-novel-coronavirus) <health.gov.au/news/latest-information-about-novel-coronavirus>

For international updates go to [World Health Organisation – Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) outbreak](https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19) <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19>

WHO resources [World Health Organisation – Coronavirus](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1) <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1>

To receive this publication in an accessible format [email Emergency Management](mailto:COVID-19@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <COVID-19@dhhs.vic.gov.au>

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