

PHICS-PHICNA POSITION STATEMENT ON THE USE OF MASKS IN HEALTHCARE FACILITIES IN THE POST-PHEIC STATUS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
as of 13 December 2023

Background:

COVID-19, no longer considered a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), is now an established and ongoing health issue (WHO, 2023). This transition from critical emergency-response activities to longer-term, sustained COVID-19 disease prevention, control and management emphasises the shift towards integration of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) activities into routine systems and practices. Updated recommendations for health-care facilities include a focus on the hierarchy of control measures, environmental cleaning, transmission-based precautions, and appropriate selection and use of PPE.

The proper wearing of mask as a PPE (or part of a set) reduces the spread of respiratory illnesses within the healthcare setting by decreasing the number of infectious droplets that may be inhaled or exhaled by healthcare workers (HCW), patients, caregivers, and visitors.

Recommendations:

- 1. Continuous use of appropriate mask in targeted areas within healthcare facilities is recommended when the impact of COVID-19 in the healthcare system is acceptable.¹**

Healthcare facility area	Recommendation
Clinical areas (wards, ER, ICU, hemodialysis units, cardiovascular units, admitting units and other areas where patient care is being provided or patient-HCW interactions are significant)	Mask is required for all HCWs and caregivers.
Non-patient areas (e.g. department offices, medical records, conference room, administrative offices, call rooms, dormitories, canteens, parking areas)	Mask is optional. ²
Designated COVID-19 wards, ICU, isolation areas	N95 mask or equivalent respirator should be worn along with gown, gloves, and eye protection by HCWs especially when Aerosol-Generating Procedures (AGPs) are performed

Note: These masking recommendations are always part of the recommendations for PPE use in adherence to Standard and Transmission-based precautions.

¹Acceptable impact is considered when on a national level, there are no restrictions on daily activities, minimal COVID-19 transmission and morbidity, and limited disruptions on social and economic activities.

²If the areas become more conducive to spread of virus (e.g. overcrowding, with poor ventilation), masking becomes required.

2. Wearing a mask, alongside frequent hand hygiene and physical distancing of at least one (1) meter, is recommended for individuals at high risk for severe and critical COVID-19.

Individuals are highly encouraged to make a careful assessment of their risk based on reliable health information and/or consultation with physician or other knowledgeable HCWs. The list of individuals considered high risk for severe or critical COVID-19 include, but are not limited to:

- a. Elderly
- b. Individuals with co-morbidities
- c. Immunocompromised individuals (symptomatic HIV, on chronic steroids, with active cancer, on immunosuppressive agents, etc.)
- d. Pregnant women
- e. Unvaccinated individuals

3. Wearing of mask is likewise recommended for the following:

- a. During times of increased cases of COVID-19 or other respiratory illnesses like influenza and influenza-like illnesses, respiratory syncytial virus infections, or cases of atypical or “walking pneumonia”, etc.
- b. Symptomatic individuals (particularly those with respiratory symptoms, e.g., cough, colds/runny nose, sore throat)
- c. Any individual who would like to be protected or whose personal risk assessment for COVID-19 is significant
- d. Areas with poor ventilation or overcrowding (e.g., elevators, waiting areas)

4. Regular review and updating of institutional policies should be done on the use of mask based on the current local and national status, and impact of COVID-19 and other illnesses transmitted via respiratory droplets.

Additional reminders for healthcare facilities in relation to the use of masks:

1. Dispose used masks correctly. Ensure there are areas for disposal of masks after use, including at the entrances/exits to the facility, with appropriate waste bins for disposal.
2. Ensure sufficient hand hygiene stations where masks are provided for use and at areas for removal (e.g., entrance and exit areas).
3. Wear the mask to fully cover the mouth and nose.
4. Change the mask if it becomes wet, soiled, or damaged.
5. Avoid touching or adjusting the mask once worn; if done, practice hand hygiene.
6. Do not share masks.

Reference:

Infection prevention and control in the context of coronavirus disease (COVID-19): a living guideline, 9 October 2023. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2023 (WHO/2019-nCoV/IPC/guideline/ 2023.3)

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