

Best Practice Guideline	Mask indications in healthcare settings
Date	November 1, 2023
Reviewed Date	
Revised Date	

A printed version of this guideline may not be the most recent version. The OFFICIAL version is located at www.ipac.vch.ca.

Purpose

To support safe and effective use of medical masks in VCH healthcare facilities.

Site Applicability

Applies to all VCH healthcare settings.

Definitions

- **Patient:** any individual accessing a VCH healthcare service, inclusive of patients in acute care settings, clients accessing community health services and individuals who reside in or receive respite care in a long-term care or assisted living facility.
- **Staff:** all clinical and non-clinical persons working in the healthcare setting, inclusive of contractors, students and volunteers.
- **Medical Mask:** A medical grade face mask that meets American Society for Testing and Materials International (ASTM), International Organization for Standardization (ISO) or equivalent performance requirements for bacterial filtration efficiency, particulate filtration efficiency, fluid resistance, pressure differential, flame spread, skin sensitivity and cytotoxic testing.
- **Patient care area:** An area within a health care facility (including a contracted facility), hallway or lobby, which is accessible to patients, residents or clients who are there to access care or services. This includes any other location where care is provided, such as home and community care locations (including a client’s home). It does not include locations such as administrative areas or private offices which are not generally accessed by patients, residents or clients.

Considerations

1. Indications for respirators are not included in this guidance, refer to the [VCH Respiratory Protection Program for Air-Purifying Respirators](#)
2. Refer to [VCH Infection Prevention and Control](#) webpage for supporting resources, including: point of care risk assessment, additional precautions signage and best practice guidance, personal protective equipment donning and doffing procedures, and VCH diseases and conditions table to identify when droplet precautions are indicated.
3. Consult [VCH People Safety](#) for any health or safety contraindications to using a medical mask.

4. Refer to [VCH visitation resources](#) for more information about visiting a VCH facility
5. VCH will provide medical masks for staff, patients, and visitors where indicated within these guidelines.

Guidelines

Routine Indications for Use of a Medical Mask

Staff:

- Wear a medical mask according to a [point of care risk assessment](#).
- Wear a medical mask when entering the room or bed space of a patient on additional precautions for a confirmed or suspected communicable disease transmitted by the droplet route.
- Wear a medical mask as directed by a medical health officer (or delegate) and as required by a workplace communicable disease safety plan.
- Educate, support and assist patients and their visitors to adhere to masking guidance.

Patients:

- Wear a medical mask when presenting to any healthcare setting with symptoms of respiratory infection (e.g., fever, cough, difficulty breathing, sore throat, congestion).
- Wear a medical mask on transport and when in a common space while under additional precautions, as directed by a health care provider.
- Wear a medical mask based on personal choice or when directed by a health care provider. Medical masks are made available in the healthcare setting for patients who choose to use one.
- Exception to the above indications for patients who cannot tolerate a mask due to a health condition or physical or mental impairment.

Visitors:

- Visitors will reschedule their visit if they are experiencing symptoms of viral respiratory infection whenever possible.
- Wear a medical mask for urgent visits when experiencing respiratory symptoms.
- Wear a medical mask (as tolerated) when directed by a healthcare provider to visit a patient on additional precautions.

Indications When Provincial Mask Policy is in Effect

The following mask indications are applied **in addition** to those listed above.

Patients:

- Wear a medical mask in all common waiting rooms associated with a patient care area and in the emergency department, as tolerated.

Staff and visitors:

- Wear a medical mask when entering VCH patient care areas:
 - Acute care facilities inclusive of acute, rehab and mental health care areas
 - Ambulatory diagnostic and treatment areas supporting acute services, including:
 - emergency department
 - medical imaging
 - surgical day care and operating rooms
 - cardiac procedure areas
 - bronchoscopy and endoscopy procedure areas
 - Ambulatory care clinics serving patients attending from the community
 - Community-based health care services, including: community health clinics, home care services, outreach services, adult day care programs, and urgent primary care clinics.
- On entry to long term care and assisted living homes, inclusive of: common areas, activity rooms, multi-bed resident rooms and other areas where care services are delivered.

Exemptions to mask policy indications:

- Individuals who meet the following criteria:
 - Children under 5 years old
 - People unable to wear a mask because of a health condition or physical or mental impairment
 - People unable to put on or remove a mask without help from another person
 - People communicating with someone with a hearing impairment
- Administrative areas and designated eating areas, including: staff offices, meeting rooms, auditoriums, charting & dictating areas, staff lounges and cafeterias.
- Areas restricted for staff only access, including: staff changing rooms, MDRD, laboratory, anatomy/pathology, stores and replenishment areas, pharmacy, mechanical/engineering areas, loading docks and related storage areas, mobile equipment depots, biomedical areas, research areas.
- Visiting alone with a resident in a long-term care or assisted living home, either in a single occupancy room or in a common area of the home when others are not around.

- When eating or drinking while visiting a long-term care home.
- At the discretion of the health care provider and after performing a point of care risk assessment, if the provider determines wearing a mask would not be indicated in routine circumstances and will interfere or prevent providing appropriate care to a patient.

Extended Mask Use

Medical masks are single use. Once a mask is removed for any reason, discard and perform hand hygiene. Don a new medical mask when indicated.

Extended mask use between patient encounters is acceptable when:

1. The provincial mask policy is in effect and masks are indicated for all patient care encounters
2. Working within a patient cohort, as per the direction of Infection Prevention and Control

In all circumstances, masks are removed:

- When the mask is wet or soiled. This includes after patient care encounters that produced splash or spray of body fluids.
- On leaving the patient care area (e.g., at the end of shift, during breaks or mealtimes)
- After contact with any patient on additional precautions

References

[PHAC. \(2013\). Routine Practices and Additional Precautions for Preventing the Transmission of Infections in Health Care Settings.](#)

BC Ministry of Health Policy Communique. (2023)