



Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) Memo for Unifor Health Care Workers

November 2020

SAFETY FOR HEALTH CARE WORKERS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Health care workers are on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, trusted to care for those affected and help prevent others from becoming ill. While many workers are working from home and doing their part to slow the spread of COVID-19, health care workers must continue their work on the front lines, frequently risking contact with the virus.

Unifor has received many questions about member rights when it comes to health and safety in health care settings amid the pandemic. This memo outlines some of the measures and information available to you as a health care worker to mitigate risk and protect your health and wellbeing.

HEALTH CARE WORKERS HAVE THE SAME RIGHTS AS ALL OTHER WORKERS

Health care workers have three basic rights in the workplace, which are fundamental to understanding health and safety law. These three rights are the

1. Right to participate in health and safety related workplace issues;
2. Right to know about workplace hazards and the
3. Right to refuse unsafe work

Each one of these rights is fundamental and must be understood, implemented and protected at all times. Your workplace health and safety committees and union health and safety representatives are entrusted to protect these rights on your behalf in all Unifor represented workplaces.

SPEAK TO YOUR JOINT HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC) and Health and Safety Representatives play an important role in identifying potential or existing hazards and making recommendations for improvement to occupational health and safety. Your JHSC should be your first point of contact if you have any concerns about your safety or the protocols being followed in your workplace.

We encourage Unifor members on JH&SCs and Health and Safety Representatives, to review all health and safety

related policies and programs to ensure they contain up-to-date information related to COVID-19. Unifor has recently published fact sheets on protecting workers from COVID-19 that can be found under the Resources tab on unifor.org/COVID19.

Workers have the right to be informed of any hazard in their workplace, and to receive training on any occupational health and safety measures or procedures that are set out by their employer. Additionally, the policies and programs of the employer should be reviewed to determine if they are realistic and feasible.

ACCESS APPROPRIATE PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

There are various important pieces of PPE that are available to workers in health care settings including: gowns, aprons, coveralls, glasses, goggles, gloves, shoe or boot covers, visors, shields and of course masks of various types including surgical masks and respirators of varying protection levels.

Health care workers routinely use surgical masks as part of their personal protective equipment. However, surgical masks are not respirators and are not certified as such. They do not protect the wearer from inhaling small particles that can remain airborne for long periods of time.

Surgical masks are effective barriers for retaining large droplets which can be released from the wearer through talking, coughing, or sneezing. Surgical masks are useful in many patient care areas. In fact, they may reduce wound site contamination during surgical or dental procedures. But surgical masks cannot be used as a protection from many hazardous airborne materials. The filter material of surgical masks does not retain or filter out submicron particles. In addition, surgical masks are not designed to eliminate air leakage around the edges¹.

Employers and JH&SCs should use widely available guidance to help identify risk levels in workplace settings and to determine any appropriate control measures to implement. Additional guidance may be needed as COVID-19 outbreak conditions change, including as new information about the virus, its transmission, and impacts, becomes available. This topic should be on the agenda of every Safety Committee Meeting.

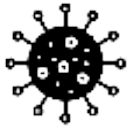
Recognizing the ongoing global shortage and increasing demand for PPE, the priority of governments and hospital administrations should be in securing and not on hoarding PPE, locking away or otherwise refusing access to PPE for workers at risk. If this is occurring in your workplace, address it immediately with your JH&SC.

UNDERSTANDING DIRECTIVE #5 (ONTARIO)

In Ontario, special directives have been mandated through the collaborative actions of health care unions and associations, Unifor included, with the provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health and the provincial government. Directive #5 provides clear guidance that N-95 or superior protection masks, face shields and other personal protective equipment are to be provided to health care staff working on the front line in long-term care facilities or hospitals dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks.

The government adopted these improved precautionary measures which force health care workplaces' management and operators to provide the necessary PPE when requested by a health care professional, during a point of care risk assessment (PCRA). Put in simpler terms, if a health care worker in a facility in outbreak comes in contact with a suspected, probable, or confirmed case of COVID-19 in a patient or resident where two-metre distance cannot be assured, that health care worker can determine if a fit-tested N-95 respirator or approved equivalent or better protection is needed and if so must receive it.

See: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/directives/public_hospitals_act_ga.pdf



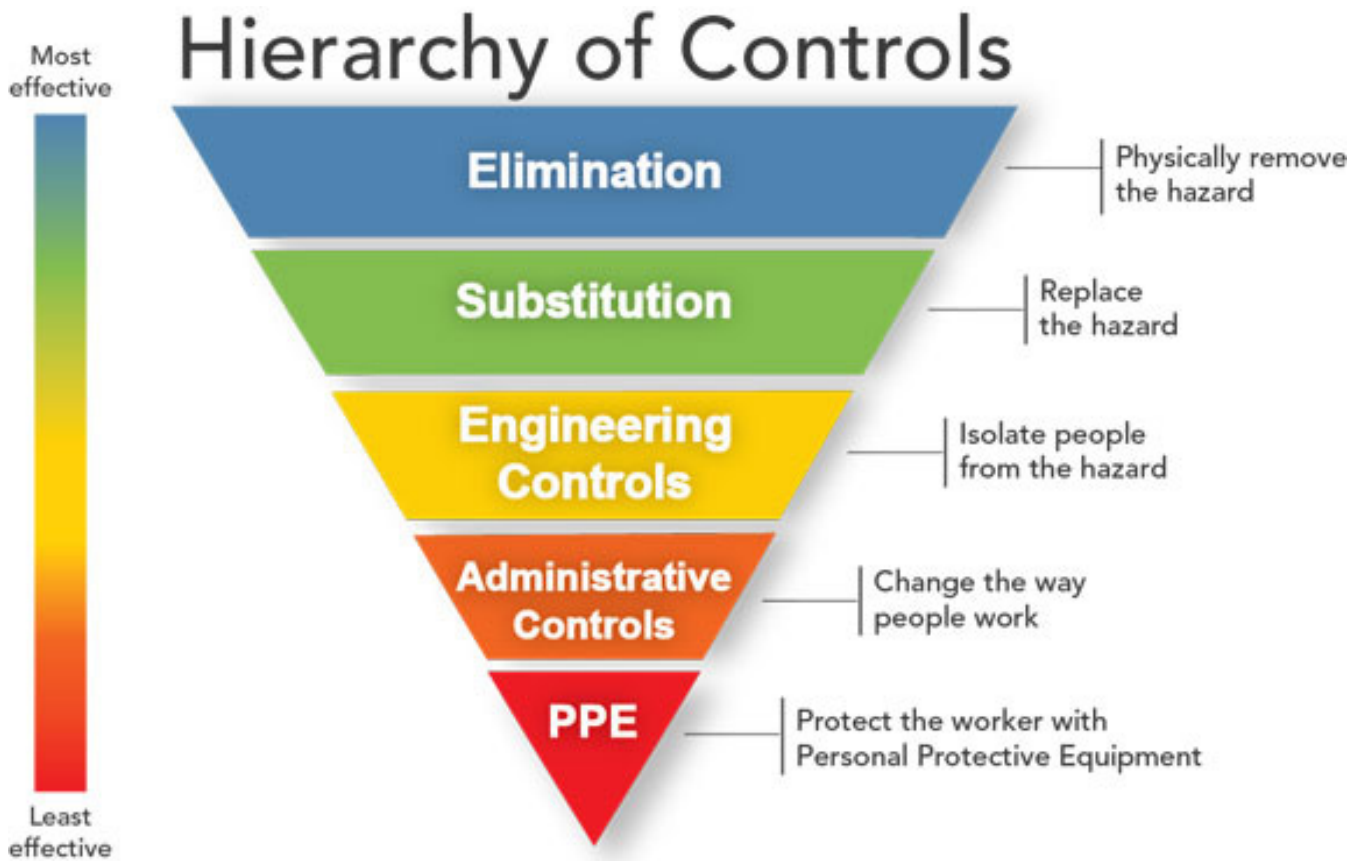
IMPLEMENTING HAZARD CONTROL MEASURES

Although the focus of this COVID-19 Health and Safety Fact Sheet is Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) we would be remiss if we didn't mention the hierarchy of controls.

The best way to control any hazard is to systematically eliminate or remove it from the workplace, rather than relying on workers to reduce their personal exposure. Obviously the best way to stop the spread of COVID-19 is to not be exposed to it in the first place through elimination or removal.

Until this COVID-19 pandemic is resolved through a vaccine or herd immunity, exposure to the virus must be controlled using the "hierarchy of controls"

Relevant protection measures are (listed from most effective to least effective): engineering controls, administrative controls, safe work practices (a type of administrative control), and lastly PPE (Personal Protective Equipment).



BE CONNECTED TO YOUR UNION

Unifor has launched a hub for member information about the pandemic at unifor.org/COVID19 and encourages members to check the site regularly for updates.

¹https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/prevention/respiratory_protection.html?=&wbdisable=true
²see diagram link