

February 25, 2021

Joint Statement: COVID-19 and Personal Protective Equipment

Protecting the mental and physical health and safety of health care workers is an imperative for employers and unions. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that the appropriate steps are taken to protect the health and safety of all health care workers in Alberta and prevent exposure to and transmission of COVID-19. Ensuring that appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) is used by all Alberta Health Services and Covenant Health staff and physicians, while also preserving supplies of specialized equipment for when they are required to safely provide care, is critical.

This Joint Statement issued by Alberta Health Services (AHS), Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), Covenant Health (CH), Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA), and United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) applies to the parties of this agreement and is intended to provide clarity on the approach in Alberta.

This Joint Statement has been updated to provide additional clarity on the use of PPE following a Point of Care Risk Assessment (PCRA) by staff. It incorporates and balances a number of perspectives including the precautionary principle and evolving guidance from the Public Health Agency of Canada in their position on the use of PPE. (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/infection-prevention-control-covid-19-second-interim-guidance.html>).

The parties acknowledge that data and evidence continue to accumulate as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, and jointly commit to reviewing and updating this position statement at least annually or as necessary to reflect any relevant changes in this data.

All Parties to this Joint Statement acknowledge that broader use of fit-tested N95 respirators may benefit worker wellness but may not significantly reduce the rate of occupationally acquired COVID-19. Thus, the Parties commit to supporting a collaborative and holistic approach to worker safety that includes meticulous attention to fitness to work protocols, utilizing PPE as per guidelines as outlined in this joint statement, precise execution of donning and doffing protocols, and hand hygiene practices, and maintaining required physical distancing whenever possible, including when not providing direct patient care.

The parties agree to the following PPE standards for front-line health care workers across the care continuum in Alberta:

1. **Access** - All health care workers who are within two metres of patients suspected, presumed or confirmed to have COVID-19 shall have access to appropriate PPE. This will include access to surgical/procedure masks, fit-tested NIOSH-approved N95 respirators or approved equivalent, gloves, face shields with side protection (or goggles), and impermeable or, at least, fluid resistant gowns. Additional information on current PPE requirements, such as continuous masking and eye protection, can be found at: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17048.aspx>.

The employers commit to provide all health care workers with information on safe utilization of all PPE and employees shall be appropriately trained to safely don and doff all of these supplies.

No health care worker will be denied a request for PPE based solely on their classification.

- PCRA** – For clinical health care workers, a PCRA must be performed before every patient interaction. The PCRA should include the frequency and probability of routine or emergent aerosol generating medical procedure (AGMP) being required. If a health care worker determines on reasonable grounds that specific PPE is required, they shall have access to the appropriate PPE based on their PCRA, which could include fit-tested N95 respirators or approved equivalent protection, and this will not be unreasonably denied by their employer.

For non-clinical health care workers who are required to be within two metres of a patient and who do not conduct a PCRA, access to the PPE will be based on their assessment of all known and foreseeable risks and hazards.

The parties acknowledge that there may be circumstances when a health care worker's choice of PPE based on their PCRA may differ from the employer's perspective on what should be used. Discussions related to these differences must occur within a just culture, i.e., where all parties feel respected, safe, encouraged, and enabled to have these discussions and make these critical decisions around PPE use.

- Contact and Droplet Precautions** - The available science, evidence and experience continues to demonstrate that droplet and contact precautions (which include wearing gloves, a gown, a medical mask and eye protection) must be used by health care workers for all interactions with patients who are considered exposed to, suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19.

Substitution of an N95 or equivalent respirator in place of a medical mask may occur based on a health care worker's PCRA or risk assessment.

- AGMPs** - Fit-tested and seal-checked N95 respirators or approved equivalent protection must be used by all health care workers in the room where AGMPs are being performed, or when frequent or unexpected exposure to AGMPs is anticipated, or with any intubated patients suspected or confirmed to have a viral respiratory infection.

A full list of AGMPs is provided in the AHS AGMP Guidance Tool (See <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17091.aspx>)

Note: EMS personnel are required to wear N95 respirators in all ground and air ambulances.

- PPE Supply** - The employers and unions that prepared this communication will assess the available supply of PPE on an ongoing basis. The employers commit to continue to explore all available avenues to obtain and maintain a sufficient supply.

In the event that the supply of PPE reaches a point where current supplies are anticipated to last for only 30 days (i.e., a shortage), or where utilization rates indicate that a shortage will occur, the employers will be responsible for developing contingency plans in consultation with the unions and applicable Joint Worksite Health and Safety Committees to ensure the safety of health care workers.

For more information on Infection Prevention and Control and PPE protocols, visit ahs.ca/covid.