



# DOSH Hazard Alert

Helping employers prevent workplace injuries

**Current as of April 6, 2022**

## Respirator Use to Prevent COVID-19 During Health Care Staff Shortages

**Attention:** Employers with employees working in hospitals, clinics, long-term care or other health care facilities

### Increased Risk for COVID-19

Due to a shortage of staff working in health care facilities, employees infected with COVID-19 are returning to work while possibly contagious. This increases the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

### Respirator Requirements and Recommendations

The L&I Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) requires fit-tested respirators be used by any employee who enters the room of a patient with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

DOSH recommends, but does not require, fit-tested respirators be used by employees who work in proximity to co-workers with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

A full respirator program, including fit testing, is required when employers require employees to use respirators as personal protective equipment (PPE) — whether or not DOSH requires such use.

### Respirators — The Safest Alternative

Respirators are tested and regulated to ensure a reliably high level of protection to wearers — much higher than facemasks (e.g., surgical or medical procedure masks) and face coverings. In addition:

- Studies indicate that N95s perform at least as well as surgical masks for use as a source control, even with an exhalation valve\*.

\* See NIOSH publication No. 2021-107 at [www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2021-107](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2021-107). Also, respirators with exhalation valves should not be used in clinical settings where a sterile field must be maintained.

- Respirators provide a more complete seal around the wearer's mouth and nose than a facemask or cloth face covering. The adequacy of the seal can be verified by fit testing the respirator; which is something that cannot be done for facemasks.
- Surgical N95s (with FDA approval) are available as a source control or as PPE for tasks where protection from liquid splashes is indicated.

### Voluntary Use

When an employer determines respirator use isn't required, but an employee wants to wear one anyway, voluntary use requirements apply. Employers must accommodate its employee's voluntary use of protective devices or equipment according to WAC 296-62-601 through WAC 296-62-60103.

[www.Lni.wa.gov/HELSAEmergencyRule](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/HELSAEmergencyRule)

Fit-testing isn't required for voluntary use, but it is recommended to optimize protection.

### Respirators as Source Control

When an employer decides certain employees (e.g. an employee potentially infected with COVID-19) must use an N95 or other respirator solely for source control (i.e., worn to protect others) all of the following apply:

- Employers can consider use as voluntary under Chapter 296-842 WAC, The Respirator Rule. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=296-842>
- A reduced respirator program is required (e.g., for N95 use this is limited to providing a copy



of Table 2 from the Respirator rule) and the employer must ensure use doesn't create a health or safety hazard.

- The employer must document the respirator is used only for source control (if the respirator isn't fit-tested).
- Fit-testing is encouraged, not required.

## **Get help from L&I**

### **L&I COVID-19 Safety webpage**

[www.Lni.wa.gov/COVIDSafety](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/COVIDSafety)

### **Contact L&I**

Email [EyeOnSafety@Lni.wa.gov](mailto:EyeOnSafety@Lni.wa.gov), or call 1-800-423-7233.

### **Consultation Program**

L&I provides consultations, training, and technical assistance at no cost to employers. Get more information and schedule a free confidential consultation at [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyConsultants).

*This alert is intended to bring awareness to potential safety and health hazards in the workplace. It is not a rule and creates no new legal obligations. L&I recommends employers and workers review the safety and health rules for specific requirements at [www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules](http://www.Lni.wa.gov/SafetyRules).*

FY22-229 [02-2022]