

# Surgical Mask Considerations for Healthcare Practices during COVID-19

April 2020

## Note to Member Services about providing surgical masks to patients

Due to the global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) including **surgical masks**, it is important to ensure these are given and used appropriately to minimise wastage.

Surgical masks are not currently recommended for general use by the community. Regular handwashing, coughing safely (covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or into an elbow) and practicing social-distancing are essential to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

A surgical mask should be provided to any presenting patient suspected to have Covid-19 or meeting current recommendations for testing. (Please visit the [NSW Health website](#) for latest advice.) This includes any person who has clinical symptoms (including fever, cough, shortness of breath, and/or sore throat) and who meet any of the following:

- 1 had close contact with a confirmed case of Covid-19
- 2 returned from international travel in the past 14 days
- 3 works in healthcare, aged-care, or other residential-care
- 4 lives in a community with local transmission of Covid-19

Once a surgical mask is provided to a person with suspected Covid-19, they should be isolated (or placed in a single room) and away from other people whilst awaiting further medical assessment. Additional PPE is required by staff if undertaking physical examination or performing a diagnostic test on any patient suspected to have Covid-19.

Most other people will not benefit from wearing a surgical mask, particularly if they are well. It is important to stress to patients that masks should be reserved for people who are;

- 1 unwell (with respiratory symptoms or fever)
- 2 close contacts and patients suspected or diagnosed with Covid-19 (to support self-isolation)
- 3 household members living with a person diagnosed with Covid-19
- 4 healthcare workers and at risk of exposure to Covid-19

Surgical masks are generally used as a physical barrier to protect the user or health worker from hazards (e.g. large droplets, bodily fluids.) They may also limit the spread of respiratory secretions by infective individuals. Surgical masks are not designed to seal tightly, and potentially contaminated air may pass through gaps. These masks are single-use only and must be changed between patients or if they become soiled or wet. Improper use will not prevent transmission of COVID-19.

**For further information** regarding mask properties and usage, please visit the following links:

- NSW Clinical Excellence Commission – [Properties of different types of masks](#) (Feb 2020)
- NSW Clinical Excellence Commission – [Recommended guidance on mask use in NSW](#) (19 March 2020)