A background image of a healthcare worker, likely a nurse, wearing a dark uniform and a face mask, looking towards the camera. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter.

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

March 23, 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 in isolation at home and doing their part to slow the spread of COVID-19, health care workers must continue their work on the front lines, risking contact with the virus.

Unifor has received many questions about member rights when it comes to health and safety in a health care setting 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.

SPEAK TO YOUR JOINT HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

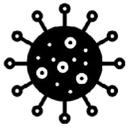
Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSC) and Health and Safety Representatives play an important role in identifying potential or existing hazards and making recommendations for improvement to occupational health and safety. Your JHSC should be your first point of contact if you have any concerns about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

We encourage Unifor members on JHSC and Health and Safety Representatives, to review workplace policies and programs to ensure they contain up-to-date information related to COVID-19. Unifor has recently published a fact sheet 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 measure or procedures that are set out by their employer. Additionally, the policies and programs should be reviewed to determine if they are realistic and feasible.

ACCESS APPROPRIATE PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

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.

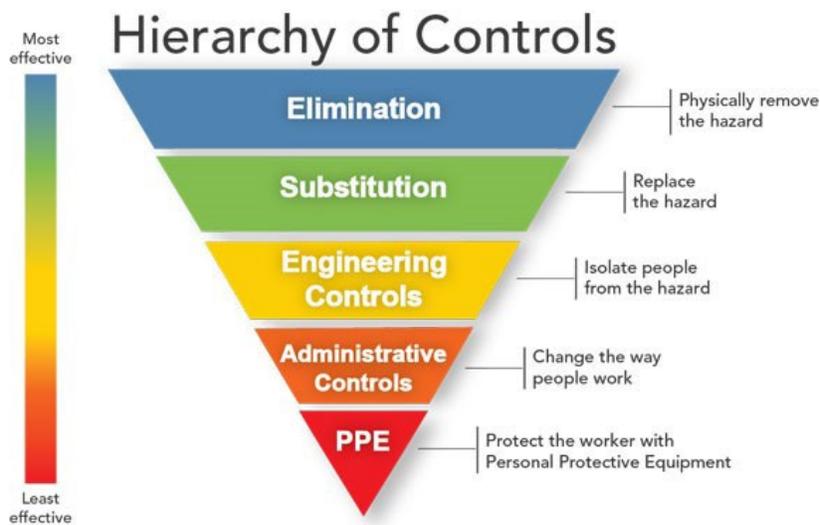
Employers and workers should use this planning guidance to help identify risk levels in workplace settings and to determine any appropriate control measures to implement. Additional guidance may be needed as COVID-19 outbreak conditions change, including as new information about the virus, its transmission, and impacts, becomes available.

Recognizing the global shortage and increasing demand for PPE, the priority of governments and hospital administration should be in securing PPE from other industries in less urgent need 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 JSHC.

IMPLEMENT HAZARD CONTROL MEASURES

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.

During this COVID-19 outbreak, when it may not be possible to eliminate the hazard, the traditional 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). This is known as using the hierarchy of controls².



STAY 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

²(image source)<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hierarchy/default.html>