



Universal Masking of Staff in Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Facilities

Maryland is now experiencing widespread community transmission of COVID-19. Additionally, CDC has published new evidence supporting the likelihood that COVID-19 can be transmitted from people who are asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic. Together, these facts increase the likelihood that Maryland nursing homes and assisted living facilities will experience increased numbers of outbreaks. Already, MDH is aware of multiple outbreaks of COVID-19 in these settings, many of which appear to have been initiated by asymptomatic and/or pre-symptomatic staff.

To help prevent these outbreaks, MDH recommends that all personnel who provide care or otherwise interact with residents of Maryland nursing homes and assisted living facilities should wear a medical facemask at all times while working in these facilities. Procedure or surgical masks are preferred; personnel do not need N95 respirators for this purpose. Facemasks should be worn even in non-clinical areas, such as employee break rooms. If masks need to be taken off for the purposes of eating or drinking, personnel should ensure they are maintaining appropriate social distances (>6 feet) from residents and other personnel.

When directly interacting with patients suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19, it is essential that personnel also wear eye protection as well as a gown and gloves. We also want to remind personnel about the importance of frequent and careful hand hygiene, and of following all previously distributed guidance around infection control and social distancing, including visitor restrictions, staff and patient symptom screening, and discontinuation of all group activities.

We appreciate that implementation of this guidance will be challenging in the context of widespread shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), including facemasks, and MDH will continue to work with facilities and other agencies to improve access to essential PPE. Requests for PPE and other health-related equipment or supplies (except for ventilators) should be routed from the requestor to their respective local health department using the attached form (Emergency Medical Material Request Form PPE).

To conserve the supply of facemasks, facilities may consider extended use of facemasks. With extended use, personnel only need to change their facemask if it becomes soiled, the integrity is compromised, or after care of a resident on droplet or contact precautions. To avoid cross contamination, employees should use the following infection prevention and control practices when applying and removing their facemasks:

- Perform hand hygiene prior to putting on a facemask.
- Touch the facemask only by the ear loops or ties.
- Avoid adjusting the facemask during wear. If the facemask must be adjusted, perform hand hygiene, adjust the facemask, and perform hand hygiene again.
- Remove the facemask carefully, by touching only the ear loops or ties.

- Store facemasks in a breathable bag such as a brown paper bag with the employee's name written on the outside.
- Perform hand hygiene after facemask removal

Please contact MDH at (410) 767-6700 if you have questions or concerns about this new guidance.