

MASK FIT TESTING FOR LEARNERS DURING COVID-19

Version Date: [Revised on June 1, 2021](#)

The following revisions have been made to the version last updated in December 2020:

- Extension of temporary process delineated in “Recommended Approach.”
- Addition of language that hospitals will help verify that learners are mask-fitted properly.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide recommendations to Toronto Region Hospitals and Educational Institutions on approach for mask fit testing for learners during COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

An N95 respirator is a respiratory protective device that reduces the wearer’s exposure to airborne particles, from small particle aerosols to large droplets (CDC, 2020). In Toronto Region Hospitals, N95 respirators are required for various clinical activities, such as protected code blue, caring for patients with active pulmonary TB, varicella, or when the mode of transmission of a novel infectious disease remains unknown. During the COVID-19 pandemic, N95s are required for respiratory protection during Aerosol-Generating Medical Procedures (AGMPs) on deemed positive or confirmed COVID-19 patients.

In preparation for hospital-based placements, learners have routinely been required to complete N95 mask fit testing to ensure preparedness for placement activities, as well as overall preparedness for emergency circumstances. Most often, this is the responsibility of the Educational Institution (per most Affiliation Agreements and Placement Agreements) in advance of a placement, either by a third-party vendor, campus office or arrangement with a healthcare organization. For medical learners, mask fit is completed through the Academy structures. Medical residents and fellows are fit tested by the hospitals as they are employees.

Due to campus closures, personal protective equipment (PPE) conservation strategies and access to PPE, some Educational Institutions have been experiencing challenges ensuring learners are mask fit tested prior to beginning a placement. The availability of resources needed to perform respirator fit testing continues to be increasingly restricted, coupled with the on-going need to support personal protective equipment (PPE) conservation strategies. With large numbers of learners continuing to complete hospital-based placements, there is a need to revisit respirator fit requirements, establish harmonization, and ensure clarity and equity of appropriate access to testing.

PRINCIPLES

1. All learners will be provided with and will wear appropriate PPE for their placement activities per legislation, provincial directives, and hospital policies.
2. As with all clinical and professional activities during placements, learner competencies will be considered to determine appropriateness of tasks and will be under supervision. Exceptions may occur should regulatory bodies release requirements and restrictions related to learner interactions with COVID-19+ patients.
3. N95 respirators should be used when a regulated health professional/healthcare learner determines that it may be required based on the point of care risk assessment (PCRA), their professional and clinical judgement, and their proximity to the patient or resident.
4. Learners who do not have current respirator fit status **must not** perform, be present during clinical activities requiring N95 respirators (e.g., AGMP) or when a patient requires airborne precautions, until they are able to access and have completed fit testing.

RECOMMENDED APPROACH

As learners continue to participate in clinical activities that may require an N95 mask (more broadly that COVID-19), as well as ensure preparedness for emergency circumstances, it is expected that Educational Institutions continue to mask fit test **all learners** prior to placements during the COVID-19 pandemic, per regular processes and existing affiliation/placement agreements.

As a time limited temporary measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, if a learner was unable to fulfill mask fit requirements ahead of the placement, Toronto Region Hospitals will triage (via hospital-specific processes*) learners participating in hospital-based placements, to determine which learners require a mask fit test to enable safe participation in patient care and to verify that learners are mask fitted properly. Hospitals will provide this service to those learners only temporarily.

As per regular business processes, if a learner has already been fit with a mask that the hospital does not stock, they will be fit tested again, if deemed necessary by the hospital.

In September 2020, Toronto Region hospitals agreed to provide this temporary service to Educational Institutions until December 31st, 2020. Over the course of September - December, hospitals have experienced low and manageable numbers of learners arriving onsite without appropriate mask fit testing. Further extension of the temporary service was determined in December 2020, to extend until March 31, 2021.

Upon revisiting these guidelines in May 2021, this temporary process will now be extended to December 31st, 2021, or until mutually agreed to by Toronto COVID-19 Hospital Education Members.

**It is recommended that hospitals ensure clear expectations for mask fit testing to internal teams (e.g., student centres, learning institutes, etc.).*

STRATEGIES TO SOURCE MASK FIT TESTING FOR LEARNERS DURING COVID-19

The below provides creative alternatives for Educational Institutions to explore to ensure learners are mask fit tested prior to placements:

- Establish partnership agreement with local hospital (e.g., paid service) and could include space utilization, human resources, masks, etc.
- Establish campus-own mask fit testing service
- Source alternative vendors

REFERENCES

Center for Disease Control. (2020). *Personal Protective Equipment: Questions and Answers*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/respirator-use-faq.html>. 2020

Government of Canada. (2020). *Routine Practices and Additional Precautions for Preventing the Transmission of Infection in Healthcare Settings*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/routine-practices-precautions-healthcare-associated-infections/part-d.html#D.V>.

Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development. (2020). *FAQs: Definition of “Worker” in the Occupational Health and Safety Act*. <https://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/hs/faqs/worker.php>

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Toronto Region COVID-19 Hospital Operations Table. (2020). *Recommended Guidance – Masking in Hospitals*.