



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Division of the National Health Laboratory Service



Occupational Hygiene: Q&A session by Tebogo Maeteletja

Return to work preparedness

05 May 2020

Healthy, Safe, Happy & Sustainable Workplaces

PROMOTING DECENT WORK THROUGH CUTTING EDGE RESEARCH, SPECIALISED SERVICES, INFORMATION, TEACHING AND TRAINING

Questions: Masks

- Can you define what is meant by a surgical mask?
 - Medical masks are also commonly referred to as surgical masks due to the purpose that they are designed to contain inhaled droplets from being expelled into the environment by the wearer/user. A surgical mask protects the other person, not the wearer/user. They also do not prevent leakages around the edges when the user inhales.
- Does NHLS have an approved procedure for re-use of PPE (masks?)
 - No, the NHLS does not have an internal procedure for reuse of masks. However, medical masks are intended for single use and extended use (up to 6 hours) as supported by many guidelines. WHO also gives guidance on removal criteria and precautions (e.g masks should be discarded if mask becomes wet, soiled, damaged, or difficult to breathe through).

Questions: Masks

- Must the colored side of the mask be worn inside/outside?
 - The proper wearing of surgical masks should be in accordance with the manufacturer's instruction. And as far as we know, both the inner and outer layers are clearly defined in the packaging and cannot be switched around.
- Will employees be encouraged to wear masks, especially in office environments.
 - Yes, we are all encouraged to wear surgical masks to ensure that the everyone contain his/her exhaled droplets. The use of surgical masks is only effective when everyone around is wearing them.
 - Reference material: SANS 1866-1:2018. Medical devices Part 1: Medical face masks

Questions: Masks

- Do this apply to health workers only? Do employees in a foundry use their normal FFP2 masks during working hours?
 - The use of any kind of PPE is informed by the risk assessment. I believe the use of FFP2 respirators in your setting is in line with the hazard/work activity therefore the suggestion of using surgical masks in other settings (e.g. Health Care) is not meant to replace respiratory protective equipment which are required as per documented risk assessment. FFP2 respirators offer a higher protection (since they also protect the user) than surgical mask therefore if they are already in use, they should not be replaced.

Questions: Masks

- Guidelines for silver treated masks
 - We have no information regarding the requested guidelines. Perhaps the National Regulator for Compulsory Specifications (NRCS) may be contacted for advice.

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Questions: Masks

- Due to shortage of supply, can the employer supply employees with fabric masks taking other controls into consideration? Are they suitable for workplaces?
 - The National Department of Health (NDoH) recommends the use of cloth face masks to help reduce community transmission of the virus
 - A cloth mask is not a medical or surgical mask and therefore not categorised as a personal protective equipment (PPE) at the workplace
 - Cloth masks are recommended for using when in public spaces including:
 - Commuters travelling in taxis and other forms of public transport
 - Spending time in spaces where physical distancing is difficult to practice
- Source of information: <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2020/04/21/use-of-cloth-face-masks-by-members-of-the-general-public-in-south-africa-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Questions: Masks

- Guidelines for fabric masks are available but these pertain to the general public and does not make reference to any workplace. Would fabric masks that comply with the guidelines be sufficient to issue to couriers?
 - It is true that guidelines for fabric masks are not making reference to workplaces because fabric masks are for use in public setting than workplaces. Couriers are doing a specific function within the organization therefore their work activity should be included in the risk assessment which will inform what PPE they should use.

Questions: Masks

- Could the NIOH possibly provide clear guidance on the best material to use for optimum protection?
 - The NIOH provides information on what is available, it is the responsibility of the employer to use their discretion when it comes to choosing what is suitable for their purpose. Please see below updated guidelines by the department of trade and industry
http://www.treasury.gov.za/comm_media/press/2020/Annexure%20B%20%20Recommended%20Guidelines%20Fabric%20Face%20Masks%20RSA%20DTIC.pdf

Questions: Masks

- In circumstances where social distancing is not possible, would it help that everyone wears a mask to waive social distancing?
 - As much as social distancing should be practiced, there are situations where it is impossible to maintain and the use of masks may be recommended. However, it should be noted that in this kind of a situation, everyone should wear masks.

Questions: Ventilation

- Kindly share ventilation assessments to be conducted as part of the Engineering controls for COVID19
 - Natural ventilation through windows and doors is encouraged. But if you are occupying a mechanical ventilated building, you may need to look at the statements by ASHRAE that will help you decide what need to be assessed.

Questions: Ventilation

- ASHRAE have released the following statements regarding COVID19;
 - Statement on airborne transmission of SARS-CoV-2
 - Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 through the air is sufficiently likely that airborne exposure to the virus should be controlled. Changes to building operations, including the operation of heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems, can reduce airborne exposures.
 - Statement on operation of heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems to reduce SARS-CoV-2 transmission
 - Ventilation and filtration provided by heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems can reduce the airborne concentration of SARS-CoV-2 and thus the risk of transmission through the air. Unconditioned spaces can cause thermal stress to people that may be directly life threatening and that may also lower resistance to infection. In general, disabling of heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems is not a recommended measure to reduce the transmission of the virus.

- They have provided recommendations with variable levels of evidence which are on the premise of particle behavior (such as in a cough) in an indoor environment with no air movement versus and an environment with air movement.
 - https://www.ashrae.org/file%20library/about/position%20documents/pd_infectious_aerosols_2020.pdf

Questions: Ventilation

- Suitable workplace temp. ranges in summer & winter
 - I think the ventilation settings that you are referring to are meant for regulate air indoor temperature for thermal comfort. However, fresh air supply is also important.
- When contractors come and clean the filters must they use a chemical as they are currently only using tap water to clean the filters?
 - Our understanding is that cleaning of filters during ventilation maintenance may involve some form of cleaning detergent. Perhaps discussing with the contractor may be ideal to establish the rationale of only using tap water for cleaning filters.
 - <https://www.nicd.ac.za/covid-19-environmental-health-guidelines/>

Questions: Ventilation

- Besides poor air quality in workplaces, what other environmental factors accelerate the spread of SARS-COV-2?
 - It is important to acknowledge that we are all potential carriers and transmitters of the virus. I would refer to recommended controls provided to mitigate COVID19 in the Dept of health Environmental health guidelines for workplace under clause 3.3.3 and WHO;
 - Poor hygiene practices;
 - Sanitizing of all frequently touched surfaces (phones, pens and keyboards)
 - Hand sanitizing liquids must be accessible to visitors and staff.
 - Cleaning processes need to be revised to meet COVID19 requirements. Disinfectants used must be adequate to kill the virus on surfaces. These include vacuum cleaning process. Vacuum cleaning may disperse droplet back in to the air. Consider sterilizing using heat and wet vacuum
 - **COVID19 Environmental health guidelines**
 - <https://j9z5g3w2.stackpathcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-ENVIRONMENTAL-HEALTH-GUIDELINE-1-3.pdf>
 - **Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19** <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/advice-for-workplace-clean-19-03-2020.pdf>

Questions : Risk assessment

- Is there a Template with some examples companies can use to do the COVID-19 risk assessments?
 - The same risk assessment tool you have been using is relevant. The only difference is the new hazard (corona virus) which need to be included when you review your current risk assessment. One RA tool (examples are provided on the website) that I find easy to follow is the HSE (UK) RA tool. It requires the person conducting the assessment to ask the following questions;
 - who might be harmed and how
 - what you're already doing to control the risks
 - what further action you need to take to control the risks
 - who needs to carry out the action
 - when the action is needed by
 - HSE (UK). Managing risks and risk assessment at work.
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/risk/risk-assessment-template-and-examples.htm>

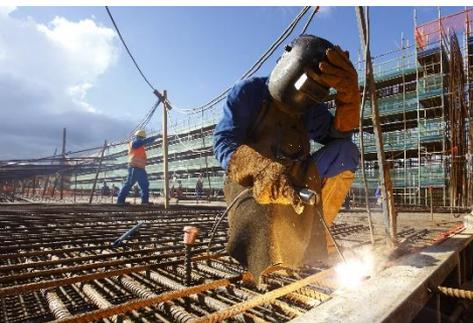
Questions : Risk assessment

- Where does Construction fall into the risk levels? Low/Medium/High.
 - This would be informed by a risk assessment performed on the particular construction site and conditions under which employees conduct their activities.
 - Furthermore, the department of labour guide for covid19 workplace preparedness provides guidance on workplace risk categories based on potential exposure to infected persons as well as possible controls. It would be important to consult this document when compiling your risk assessment.
 - The Department of Employment and Labour Workplace Preparedness: COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-19 virus).
<https://www.labourguide.co.za/workshop/1773-covid-19-guideline-mar2020/file>



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