

Frequently Asked Questions: Surgical Face Masks

17 April 2020

There are differing views on how effective surgical face masks are in preventing the spread of Coronavirus. Regular hand washing or the use of hand sanitiser are the most effective way to stop the spread of the virus, along with social distancing (2 metre rule). Face masks, when used properly and alongside other protective measures, may help stop the spread of the virus from sufferers before they experience symptoms. If anyone has a new, continuous cough, a high temperature (>37.8 C or you feel hot to touch on your chest or back) or feel unwell they should not be at work, and should seek medical advice if required.

1. When should I be wearing a surgical mask?

Masks should be worn when completing a task that requires you to be within 2 metres of others, such as a four-person lift.

2. Has a risk assessment been carried out on the use of this style of mask while working on the railway?

A risk assessment has been carried out and shared with other rail industry organisations. You will find a copy of the risk assessment here <https://workforce.hub.networkrail.co.uk/Pages/Covid-19.aspx> (Enter your Network Rail login ID and password when prompted).

3. How long can I use a mask for?

One mask, one task - the idea is that you wear a surgical mask when your task requires you to work within 2 metres of others. Wear each mask for a maximum of 1 hour. If the mask becomes wet or damp, change it sooner. If the task requires a PPE issue mask, then there's no need to wear a surgical mask.

4. Do I have to wear a face mask when I am less than 2 metres from others (and my task does not require a PPE mask)?

Wearing a surgical face mask when carrying out a task at less than 2 metres is not mandatory. However, if used properly and alongside regular hand washing a surgical face mask may help prevent the spread of the virus at the stage before people realise they are infected. Other organisations are offering their employees face masks for this reason. We hope colleagues will take this extra precaution to give mutual assurance that we are all doing everything we can to prevent the spread of Coronavirus.

5. If a colleague refuses to wear a surgical mask, or does not have one to hand, can I refuse to do work which means I am close than 2 metres to that person?

Please discuss this issue with your work team, and agree how you will manage work between you to maximise social distancing and minimise the time spent closer than 2 metres. We hope colleagues will take this extra precaution to give mutual assurance that we are all doing everything we can to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. Where, despite best efforts, it is not practical to social distance and/or use face masks please speak to your line manager who will review the Task Risk Controls with the Person In Charge (PIC) to minimise the specific risks of COVID-19.

6. How do we dispose of the masks safely after use?

You should put the mask in a suitable plastic bag, tie it and place it 'in quarantine' in another bag which should be stored safely for 72 hours. The bags can be disposed of in the non-recyclable waste. Wash your hands after disposing of your mask.

7. If I don't have a facemask and I have to work within 2 metres, does that mean that I shouldn't carry out the work?

Firstly, please be sure that there is no other way to carry out the task. Lots of tasks have been re-planned so that they don't require you to work within 2 metres. Sometimes it's unavoidable. Social distancing and hand hygiene are the best ways to control the spread of Coronavirus. Carry out a risk assessment of the task. You should minimise the time you spend within 2 metres, and maximise the distance between you and the other person as far as possible, in addition to using a mask and washing hands regularly in line with guidance from Public Health England. If you have concerns, please raise any concerns with your manager who will refer to other guidance as needed, for example Coronavirus COVID-19 Safe Working Practices (NR/L3/MTC/CP009).

8. What will we do if we run out of supplies of surgical masks?

Network Rail has access to a large supply of surgical face masks, should these be required. More masks can be procured as needed.

9. Where can I get further supplies of face masks?

Over 400,000 surgical face masks have been distributed to Network Rail locations nationwide. Further stocks will be available and are being co-ordinated regionally. For information about access to masks, please contact the relevant lead:

Eastern region – Ingrid Norman

Scotland's Railways – Simon Constable

Wales & Borders – Jamie Iggo

Southern – Mark Waple

Western – Danielle John

North West & Central – Rachel Dwyer

Route Services /others - Sophie Martin

10. What happens to colleagues who cannot have face masks?

Everyone should be planning their work so that we stay 2 metres away from colleagues whenever possible and social distancing and effective hand washing remain the best way to prevent the spread of the virus. Most tasks can be completed while social distancing (more than 2 metres) with good planning and the active support of the team, and for these no masks are required. Stick to the social distancing and hygiene guidelines (hand washing, hand sanitizer, 2 metre rule).

11. Have you given us facemasks because you expect us to come to work even if we suspect we may be infected?

We remain very clear that no one should come to work if they have any of the symptoms of Coronavirus (new, continuous cough, a high temperature >37.8 C or you feel hot to touch on your chest or back) or if you feel unwell. If you do develop these symptoms, please call 111 for medical advice, and please inform your line manager of your situation.

However, we understand that some people may not realise they are infected with Coronavirus and may not be showing any symptoms. With such a new illness, it's hard to know how many people may be affected in this way. If everyone working within 2 metres wears a mask, this provides 'mutual assurance' to colleagues.

12. If I have a face visor already, do I need to still wear a mask?

A visor will provide adequate protection for you.

13. Are more face visors going to be made available to employees?

Around 30,000 plastic face visors have been procured and will start to become available from 18 April 2020 onwards. Further information will be provided about face visors.

14. Is social distancing still needed if I wear a face mask?

You should practice social distancing wherever possible. This, along with washing your hands effectively, is the best way to control the spread of Coronavirus. Wear a mask for the task that requires you to be within 2 metres. Apply and remove the mask according to the instructions given. Wear each mask for a maximum of 1 hour. If the mask becomes wet or damp, change it sooner.

15. Have our Trades Unions been consulted about this?

Network Rail has listened closely to our Trades Unions about the provision of masks. We have worked in partnership with Trades Unions on when and how they should be used.

16. Are we taking supply away from other essential workers who need it more, like the NHS?

Many companies in the UK are manufacturing PPE to support the increased demand for these products. We have received assurances that our surgical masks supply does not impact the supply to NHS colleagues. We remain in contact with NHS colleagues about the support that we can provide to them in relation to PPE.

17. Are Railway industry colleagues (Train and Freight Operating Company staff, for example) being given masks to wear? Why aren't gateline and other customer facing staff in my local station wearing masks?

Network Rail has shared its risk assessment with railway industry partners and will work with TOCs and FOCs to ensure colleagues who have to work within 2 metres also receive this additional level of protection. The best way to protect everyone is to ensure we stick to social distancing wherever possible and follow good hand hygiene. The official advice suggests that masks may be a useful additional step to prevent people who have the virus (but don't realise it) from spreading it to others. The current advice is that they don't protect the wearer from infection.

18. Are surgical masks proven to offer protection?

There is a range of views among the experts as to whether surgical masks provide protection against the transmission of Coronavirus. Having looked carefully at the current advice and listened to our people and our Trades Unions, we have come to the view that wearing masks while carrying out tasks that require people to be within two metres of others may reduce the risk of transmission from the wearer to others. We are therefore providing masks to be worn when working within 2 metres of others.

19. Doesn't wearing a mask make someone more at risk because they touch their face more?

This is a risk. You must follow the instructions provided to pick up, apply and wear the mask, and dispose of it carefully after use. Masks should only be used when you are working within 2 metres of others and for a maximum of 1 hour per mask. The guidelines on regular hand washing and not touching your face more than is absolutely necessary still apply when wearing a mask. We will be monitoring how effectively the instructions are being adhered to. If masks are not used in line with the instructions they could increase the risk to colleagues and under these circumstances we would consider withdrawing them from use.

20. Standard 009 states on page 12 that face masks don't provide protection. Are you updating the standard?

We will be updating standard 009. What it refers to is that face masks are not considered to provide effective protection to the wearer. This remains the case. Wearing a surgical facemask can provide mutual assurance to those you're within 2 metres of. If worn properly it can protect others from the spread of the virus, capturing small droplets inside the mask.

21. Have we reviewed task risk control sheets for the most frequent tasks to reflect mask use?

We have reviewed 37 task risk control sheets and have updated them to reflect the current guidance, and the availability of surgical masks. [You will find them here:](#)

22. Will we expect colleagues to wear a surgical face mask outside work, when on public transport for example?

Our focus now is to provide surgical masks for use at work, in very specific circumstances when carrying out tasks that require you to be within 2 metres. Should Public Health England guidance change to introduce mask wearing in any public spaces, we will update our guidance.

23. Do we expect colleagues working within 2 m for longer periods of time (ie doing overhead line work in a MEWP) to wear these masks?

Surgical masks are not ideal to wear for long periods. They can become hot and uncomfortable, and they will get wet and need replacing. We are in the process of making visors available to colleagues, giving those who are working in close proximity for longer periods another option which may be more comfortable.

24. If we have labour only subcontractors working with our teams, should we give them masks too?

We have consulted across industry prior to making these face masks available and have agreed a joint set of principles to be followed by the supply chain. Recognising that it may take longer for contractors to procure supplies of masks, you can offer masks to labour only subcontractors for use while working with Network Rail teams.