

Surgical masks versus N95 respirators and non-COVID or suspected COVID-19 patients

Thank you to the Department of Anesthesiology, Critical Care and Pain Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Evidence to reduce anxiety regarding the directive to use surgical masks rather than N95 for management of non-COVID-19 patients or person under investigation for COVID-19 patients can be found below.

- Studies characterizing the prevalence of asymptomatic colonization in high prevalence settings: estimated at 1-2% based on studies of foreign nationals evacuated from Wuhan, China.^{1,2}
- A report of a patient with respiratory failure due to undiagnosed COVID-19: 35 clinicians wearing surgical masks were exposed to aerosol-generating procedures (non-invasive ventilation, difficult intubation that required a video laryngoscope plus bougie, extubation) and none of the clinicians acquired COVID-19.³
- A modeling study that estimates asymptomatic COVID-19 patients are much less contagious⁴, and infectious disease transmission principles— asymptomatic infected patients are likely to have a lower burden of virus compared to symptomatic patients.

Hospitals continue to evaluate and refine our policies based on the best available evidence to ensure we effectively protect ourselves while remaining good stewards of our limited PPE supplies.

References

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3. Ng K, Poon BH, Kiat Puar TH, et al. COVID-19 and the Risk to Health Care Workers: A Case Report. *Ann Intern Med*. 2020.
4. Li R, Pei S, Chen B, et al. Substantial undocumented infection facilitates the rapid dissemination of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV2). *Science*. 2020.