

COVID-19

# PPE: PROTECTING YOUR SAFETY

MEMBER BRIEFING



- 1** Remember: you've a duty of care to patients but your employer has a duty of care to you
- 2** Don't wait for a crisis to raise safety issues – identify risks early and escalate concerns
- 3** In some circumstances it will be reasonable to refuse to carry out a task: know your rights
- 4** Make a written note of the reason for your actions and anything which may help later



If you believe your employer is failing to comply with national safety guidelines, don't simply work unsafely

**Contact HCSA as early as you can if your require support**

## WHEN TO RAISE A CONCERN

**R**efreshed documentation issued by Public Health England (and reflected elsewhere in the UK) strengthens PPE guidelines in some of the ways that HCSA has been advocating, namely:

- It applies to all patient areas of UK hospitals
- It created a right of the individual to make a risk assessment and require higher standards of PPE
- It reminds employers of the need to risk assess working environments when implementing PPE guidelines.

However, PHE guidance for situations of PPE “shortage” are of considerable concern due to the increased risk of infection and cross-contamination to both staff and patients if they are implemented.

**If you believe your employer is failing to comply with published safety guidelines, you should not work unsafely. It is important, however, to take steps to assist in protecting you and your colleagues from subsequent action. If in doubt, contact HCSA immediately.**

**If you are forced to make a rapid decision, you may have to perform an individual risk assessment – it is important to note your rationale for any decision.**

### When is it reasonable to refuse a task?

It may be reasonable for you to refuse to undertake the particular task required.

However, whether a refusal is “reasonable” would depend on an assessment of all of the relevant facts, including:

- Your individual circumstances
- The risk of infection
- The risk to the patient of not acting
- Protection in addition to your own PPE (for instance,

whether patients are wearing masks or some alteration to the standard system for treatment). Remember, a safe system of working is broader than just PPE.

You have the right to request a risk assessment – it is important to do this as early as possible.

The Health and Safety Executive states: “It is important to note that no PPE is 100% effective and that the level of protection offered is dependent on the outcome of a thorough risk assessment based on the inherent characteristics of the hazard, including routes of transmission and the type(s) of activities being performed as well as the correct: selection; training; donning; use; doffing; storage; decontamination (of reusable items); and waste disposal.”

So a risk assessment should consider factors such as (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Your own health situation and associated risks of going ahead with treatment of patients
- Whether you have received appropriate training for the equipment you are using, and proper guidance on safe donning and doffing, with assistance available if required
- Whether the PPE being provided is maintained and in good condition according to manufacturer’s guidance
- Whether the equipment fits properly and you have been given proper fit testing. If it does not fit, have you been offered suitable alternatives?
- In the case of washable reusable items, whether appropriate decontamination and cleaning facilities are available and in use: PHE advises disposing of any reusable items if damaged or soiled (for example with secretions, body fluids)
- If being offered reusable PPE gowns or similar, are procedures in place so that these are properly washed and disinfected by the hospital’s launderer?

**CONTACT HCSA AS EARLY AS YOU CAN IF YOU NEED SUPPORT – DON’T WAIT FOR A CRISIS TO ACT**



## HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN

- 1** Do not wait for crisis situations to arise. Assess the requirements of your role and the PPE that would be necessary in each situation as soon as possible. If there is a risk that there may be insufficient PPE to safely perform your duties, then raise your concerns immediately with line management and your health and safety lead.
- 2** Where practicable, request an urgent risk assessment as per HSE guidelines (as above). This should take account of your personal circumstances (eg if you have a medical condition).
- 3** Always make a written note of the circumstances and any reasoning behind your decision – it is important to be able to use this to justify your course of action at a later date.

## Public health guidance: status and scope

**Public health guidelines such as those issued by PHE are not in themselves law and do not cater for all the situations that clinicians are likely to find themselves in.**

They provide a framework for employers who also have a statutory duty of care under health and safety law to ensure a safe working environment for their staff.

Employees are therefore within their rights to refer also to guidance from other respected bodies in challenging requirements to work in a way that may not be safe, and whilst performing a risk assessment on the PPE needed for any individual procedure.



**Remember:** Public health guidelines represent the minimum general standards which must be enacted by your employer. Standards below these should be challenged immediately.



Public Health  
England

PHE clearly states that the UK is currently experiencing a period of “sustained transmission”.

Therefore, its guidance applies to **all patient areas** within your hospital.

### Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGP)

HCSA is concerned that the list of AGPs is not comprehensive given the risks of aerosolisation of the virus. This list is still under review by PHE. HCSA has been working with other professional associations and societies to lobby for the strongest possible protections for hospital doctors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## WHAT DOES THE GMC SAY?

**The GMC has issued its own Covid-19 advice on PPE. It is important that you read and understand this information. Ultimately every situation will be different depending on the circumstances – there is no “right and wrong.”**

The GMC states that “doctors should use PPE in line with the most up to date guidance issued by the four UK health departments.” It adds that if the PPE available fell below this standard then concerns should be made with your employer and “you should make a record of your decisions and how you handled your safety concerns.”

In situations where PPE isn't im-

mediately available, it acknowledges that “difficult decisions may need to be made quickly about the safest and best course of action, taking account of the clinical situation.”

When it comes to refusal to treat patients, it advises: “We would need to look at the specifics and manner of the refusal,” adding: “We

would expect you to use your professional judgement and to have considered carefully how to work together with colleagues to provide the best care possible in the circumstances.

“While a lower standard of PPE may increase risk to some degree, doctors would

need to consider how to provide care to patients, including whether the available equipment allows treatment to continue.

“If having tried and exhausted alternative means of treating a patient you believe that this is not possible without unreasonable risk to you and to other healthcare professionals, you should escalate your concerns, record your decision and how you tried to address safety concerns.”

It is important that you take the time to read and consider the full GMC guidance on this issue.

### Read more

#### GMC Covid-19 FAQ

<https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-hub/covid-19-questions-and-answers#Working-safely>

## General Medical Council

### Useful links

#### Public Health England - PPE Advice

This includes instructions on how to safely don and doff PPE, as well as the most up to date guidelines surrounding the care of patients with Covid-19.

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-infection-prevention-and-control)

#### Royal College guidance hub

HCSA-hosted index of dedicated sections produced by the Royal Colleges

<https://hcsa.com/covid-19/royal-college-guidance.aspx>

#### Covid-19 FAQs

HCSA FAQ for members on issues including personal protective equipment.

<https://hcsa.com/covid-19/faq.aspx>

### Contact HCSA for help and advice

**Email:** [Advice@hcsa.com](mailto:Advice@hcsa.com)

**Phone:** 01256 771777

**Online:** [hcsa.com/get-help](http://hcsa.com/get-help)

**Latest updates are at**  
[www.hcsa.com/covid-19](http://www.hcsa.com/covid-19)