



# PPE and improving safety

The increased use of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 pandemic has added challenges for healthcare workers and accessing the right PPE, or having the right equipment and staff, can be difficult.

This guidance from Royal College of Physicians (RCP) aims to help individuals working in healthcare to ensure PPE use does not impair patient safety.

## Situational awareness

Wearing PPE can reduce your awareness of what is going on around you by making it more difficult to identify other team members, impair vision and reduce verbal and non-verbal cues.



### Recommendations

- > Hold team briefings and undertake pre-procedure planning to clearly define staff roles.
- > Ensure all team members are aware of expectations for the task/procedure and consider allocating individual roles to raise the alarm if observations (eg changes in vital signs and patient symptoms) are outside expected values.
- > When speaking, ask people to repeat information and requests back to you to ensure a shared understanding. This is called 'teach-back'.
- > If verbal communication is impaired:
  - speak louder and slower
  - try to use non-verbal communication (eg using fingers to illustrate small numbers, pointing to equipment or written instructions) but note these may also be hard to read in some situations
  - use written communication (eg whiteboards) to summarise intended actions
  - maintain an undisturbed environment eg reduce noise, move away from noisy equipment or other distractions.
- > Wearing PPE that covers your mouth can make communication with those who rely on lip-reading challenging; being patient and rephrasing sentences can help, as can using written communication.

## Use of PPE

Incorrect use and lack of suitable PPE may increase the risk of infection transmission. Be aware that PPE suppliers may change and some PPE may need to be worn and fit differently.



### Recommendations

- > Make sure you're up to date with the latest guidance on PPE use, including what type of PPE to use in different environments and how to use the PPE.
- > Familiarise yourself with new PPE before using it.
- > Have a PPE buddy to support correct donning and doffing.
- > Don and doff away from equipment to prevent contamination.
- > Ensure PPE is organised within the environment to support effective donning and doffing (ie arranged in sequence of requirement) with PPE stations located close to hand-washing facilities and bins.
- > Ensure adequate PPE supplies are available where needed, including:
  - regular stocking to maintain supplies in clinical areas
  - highlighting when stocks are low or difficult to access
  - escalating concerns via usual channels, including your Freedom to Speak Up Guardian
  - escalating to your professional college/society if problems persist (eg [via the RCP](#))
- > Consider using video technology where available (eg during board rounds) to minimise the number of staff required to don PPE.

## Performing tasks

Wearing PPE can negatively impact on how you carry out usual tasks, eg inserting a cannula or reading a drug chart. It can restrict movement, reduce dexterity and increase the time required to carry out certain tasks.



### Recommendations

- > Become familiar with performing tasks while wearing PPE – use simulation and build this into ongoing training.
- > Prepare as much as you can in areas where less PPE is necessary.
- > Where available, use ready-to-use or ready-to-administer medicines (eg pre-filled syringes) to reduce the number of preparation steps required while wearing PPE.
- > Allow more time for tasks you anticipate taking longer while wearing PPE. This will include individual patient reviews and procedures eg intravenous drug administration.
- > Ensure other team members are available to support you.

## Wellbeing

Wearing PPE can be physically demanding and lead to tiredness, dehydration and hunger. Unfamiliarity with PPE can also cause anxiety and stress.



### Recommendations

- > Schedule and take more frequent breaks.
- > Ensure you have adequate refreshments throughout the day.
- > Make sure you are aware of the latest guidance and feel confident about how and when to use PPE.
- > Practice donning and doffing away from clinical encounters.
- > Talk to colleagues about your concerns and anxieties, and seek extra support when needed (see the RCP [mental health and wellbeing resource](#)).

## Key messages for healthcare staff wearing PPE

- > Always brief your team on everyone's roles and potential for reduced situational awareness.
- > Use teach-back to ensure key information or instructions have been understood.
- > Take increased breaks and refreshments.

**Authors:** Jennifer Flatman, RCP Medicines Safety Clinical Fellow;\* RCP Medicine Safety Joint Working Group  
**Contact:** [RCPQIPS@rcplondon.ac.uk](mailto:RCPQIPS@rcplondon.ac.uk)

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Disclaimer: Due to the variability of type and level of PPE used in the literature and lack of available evidence on effective measures to reduce the likelihood of errors while wearing PPE, the ideas in this document are suggestions only and any decisions to put them into practice should be approved by appropriate local governance systems.

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