

Fit-Testing FAQs – updated 1/16/21

1. Why are we now recommending an N95-level of respiratory protection for all patient-facing activities? This new guidance is intended to create the safest environment for all staff and providers. The novel strain of SARS-CoV-2 is circulating in the US, and this strain of the virus that causes COVID-19 is much more easily spread person-to-person. Thus, we want to assure that our staff have this higher level of respiratory protection when in proximity of patients who may unknowingly have COVID-19 infection.

There's increasing evidence of COVID-19 transmission from people who do not have any COVID-19 symptoms at the time. Due to testing shortages, we cannot do rapid COVID-19 testing on every patient to know if they are infected—and some patients may have a negative COVID-19 test and still be infected. Given that we have faced challenges in enforcing consistent masking of patients, it means there is increased risk of COVID-19 transmission from unmasked, infected patients to our staff and employees. Therefore, we recommend that our staff use an N95-level of respiratory protection when in proximity of *all* patients.

2. How do I know where to go for fit testing? Email fittesting@lifespan.org, ask your manager, or check the fit-testing page of the COVID intranet site: <https://intranet.lifespan.org/departmentsites/infection-control-lifespan/fit-testing>. Locations, schedules and contact information for all affiliates are posted.

3. For staff who have been vaccinated is the N95 still required or is a surgical mask sufficient? An N95-level respirator is still required when caring for COVID positive and PUI patients, and recommended in other areas of our facilities, after vaccination. Even though the vaccine is estimated to be 95 percent effective, that still leaves a 5 percent risk for the vaccinated individual. The virus also continues to mutate, and while indications are positive on the efficacy of the vaccine to combat new strains, we do not have sufficient data on its efficacy for all current and future variants. We are erring on the side of caution in not changing our infection control guidance at this time, although we may do so when more data are available for high risk health care settings.

4. When we are not having direct face to face contact with patients, can we continue using our current masks? Can we take breaks where we remove the N95-level respirators? We recognize that some individuals find it difficult to wear the reusable respirators continuously for long shifts. It is acceptable to alternate your reusable respirator with another mask during breaks or when not performing patient care, depending on supply, but you must strictly observe Infection Control protocols on donning and doffing both respirators and masks. If you are having skin breakdown or dermatologic issues, please contact EOHS for evaluation and potential referral to Brown Dermatology.

5. Why are we transitioning to reusable respirators? Reusable Elastomeric respirators and Envo masks are intended to protect staff and providers from potential shortages in the supply of disposable N95 respirators, given the surge in COVID cases across the country. Although the Elastomerics are bulky, they are highly effective and have the huge benefit of being reusable over long periods, following simple cleaning and storage protocols. The Envo masks are also highly effective and reusable, but require a filter change after every shift, or every eight hours of continuous work time.

6. Why are we using different masks? Is one better than the other? The Elastomeric and Envo both provide an N95-level of protection—**from a safety perspective, they are equivalent.** Since we may not be able to secure an adequate supply of any one mask to meet our current needs, we are using both to safeguard against shortages in the supply chain and to ensure that everyone has the level of protection they require.

7. Who needs to wear an Elastomeric? An N95-level respirator—N95, Elastomeric or Envo—is now strongly recommended for all patient-facing activities, regardless of COVID status. It is also always required for any aerosol generating procedure, regardless of COVID status. We have a greater supply of reusable Elastomerics, and the Elastomeric does not require a daily filter change—filters could also be subject to supply shortages—so it remains the respirator we will be using most widely.

8. Who needs to wear the Envo mask? For now, employees in the following departments have been or are being fit-tested for Envo masks: ICUs, Emergency Medicine, Operating Room (OR), Anesthesia, Endoscopy, VIR, Cath lab, Alternative Hospital Site, Pediatrics and Behavioral Health Units and some additional areas at specific affiliates. Please note: this does not mean that everyone in these areas will receive an Envo mask immediately. Some staff members or even whole teams may continue using disposable N95s for now, because they have been fit-tested to those respirators and the supply of Envo masks is limited. As additional Envo masks arrive, depending on supply, more staff may be shifted to those masks.

9. Should only providers go for fit testing or all patient-facing staff (RN, MA, Tech)? All patient-facing staff must be fit-tested.

10. Should secretaries and other non-patient-care staff get fit-tested for potential future use of N95-level respirators? All staff who have direct patient contact should be fit-tested.

11. Can I be fit-tested if I have a beard? You should be clean-shaven to be effectively fit-tested, as required by OSHA to ensure a proper seal for your respirator. Some limited facial hairstyles – such as small mustaches that do not extend beyond the mouth – may be permissible, provided the facial hair does not interfere with the proper seal of the mask or respirator. If you have personal, religious, medical or other reasons for a beard or other extensive facial hair, you can ask to be fit-tested using a beard wrap. If you can be successfully fit-tested with the beard wrap, you may continue to use a beard wrap with your N95-level respirator. If you fail the fit-testing with the beard wrap and you work with COVID positive patients or PUIs, you may ask for an accommodation by contacting Employee and Occupational Health Services and completing the accommodation request form. [Read the policy here.](#)

12. How often does the filter on the Envo mask need to be changed? The filter must be changed after every shift, according to the CDC guidelines on emergency considerations for PPE, or every eight hours of continuous use/work time. That means if you are a proceduralist who only wears the mask for 30 minutes at a time, a filter will last you much longer than if you are wearing the mask for eight hours straight in a warm unit. [You can find Envo mask cleaning and storage instructions here.](#)

13a. How often does the Elastomeric or disposable N95 need to be changed? The Elastomeric filter should be changed every six months, or when it is saturated, contaminated or difficult to breathe through. [You can find Elastomeric cleaning and storage instructions here.](#) For use of the disposable N95s, please follow the

13b. Where do I get the replacement filters for the Envo mask? The replacement filters are being distributed to each affiliate's PPE hub. You will be able to pick up a supply of replacement filters wherever you retrieve your other PPE, depending on your role and affiliate.

14. What happens if I forget or lose my mask? Patient-facing employees must bring their fitted mask to work every day and are encouraged to keep it in a place where it will not be forgotten or lost, following infection control protocols on cleaning and storage. Employees who forget or lose their mask must speak with their manager immediately and may be asked to leave and get their mask.

15. What happens if I or my employee refuse to wear an N95-level respirator? Patient facing employees must wear a fit-tested Elastomeric, Envo mask, N95 respirator, or PAPR/CAPR when caring for a patient with known or suspected (i.e., a PUI) COVID-19 infection, when any patient is undergoing an aerosol-generating procedure, and they are strongly recommended for all other patient contact. Employees who have a medical condition must call Employee Health to discuss mask options as a reasonable accommodation. With or without an approved medical or religious accommodation, all patient facing employees are required to be fit-tested and wear a mask. Employees who refuse to wear a mask will be non-compliant and will be placed on suspension and may be unpaid. Managers should contact their HR Business Partner to discuss this in more detail.

16. Why are only certain groups receiving the Envo mask? Since there is a limited supply of Envo masks and the required filters available, some areas have been prioritized for specific clinical reasons (for example, in the OR, where fast, clear communication with colleagues is at a premium; at the alternative hospital site, where the 30-foot ceilings, loud air handling system and lack of privacy make communication in an elastomeric particularly difficult; for pediatrics, where the larger elastomeric may be frightening to children, etc).

17. Can I purchase my own N95, Elastomeric or Envo mask and wear it? For your own safety, Lifespan requires that any N95 or alternative respirator be professionally checked for fit and to ensure that it meets the NIOSH safety guidelines. In a market flooded with counterfeit products, the supply chain team does an enormous amount of work behind the scenes to ensure that the PPE they purchase is authentic, safe and functioning properly. In addition, the infection control team must be sure that the proper maintenance, cleaning and storage protocols are in place for all respirators. Only Lifespan-approved respirators should be worn for patient care. If you intend to purchase an Envo mask, be aware that there are many counterfeits and that only masks from New Hampshire-based Sleepnet Corporation are guaranteed to be genuine.

18. What if I already purchased an Envo mask? Ask your manager where you can be fit-tested and bring the mask in to be checked. If it passes the fit-test, then the mask can continue to be worn. If it does not pass, you will be fit-tested for an alternative, such as an 8210 disposable N95.

19. Do the Elastomerics and Envo masks need to be covered by a surgical mask? Yes. These respirators have exhalation valves that must be covered by a level 2 surgical mask. The surgical mask should be changed daily, or until it is wet or soiled. ***Please note: those Envo masks that were supplied with plugs for the exhalation valves must still be covered by a level 2 surgical mask, because the filters are not water resistant.***

20. If I've been fit-tested for an N95 before, do I need to be fit-tested again for an elastomeric respirator or other alternative? Yes. *You must be fit-tested for the specific mask you will be wearing.*

21. Where do I get the mask? Unless you are part of a department that was already provided with Envo masks, you will get your assigned mask when you go for fit testing.

22. Can I be fit-tested if I have a latex allergy? Yes.

23. What safety protocols are being used for fit testing? Hoods, pens, and clipboards are all disinfected after each use and the fit-testing teams are encouraging safe social distancing during testing