

COVID-19 and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

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For our general members' advice on coronavirus - what it is and what you should know - [click here](#)

Why is PPE still an issue?

As Coronavirus COVID-19 is a brand new virus, there is no natural immunity to Covid in the population, and a vaccine won't be available until next year.

As a result, there are only a couple of ways to minimise exposure. The first is to segregate people away from the hazard of COVID exposure. This why people with symptoms are asked to self-isolate; why many are still working from home and why there are still social distancing measures in place.

Employers should not require workers to attend the workplace unless the work is essential and cannot be carried out from home, or they are a workplace that has been told they can now start reopening. Workers who can carry out their job from home, should still work from home, as the best way to avoid exposure is to stay at home.

Health and Care sector workplaces should have infection control protections – effectively quarantine protocols. These must continue to be implemented.



What does the law say?

Where a risk assessment determines a high likelihood of exposure, and workers cannot be removed from exposure risk, the only other method of protection is Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

There are specific regulations on the provisions of PPE. These are legal requirements.

- All PPE must be provided on a personal individual basis
- All PPE must be CE Marked. The CE Mark will either be on the product itself or the packaging. See the photo for an example.
- No CE Mark, NO USAGE.
- It must fit the wearer, and be compatible with any other PPE they need to wear. Where airtight masks are needed, these must be fitted by a competent face fit tester.
 - A list is available at <https://www.fit2fit.org/find-a-tester/>. In practice, most manufacturers and suppliers will also perform testing.
 - Large employers such as NHS Trusts will probably also have trained competent people.
- Workers must be trained on the usage, maintenance and cleaning of PPE.
- All PPE must be provided free of charge
- Workers must wear the PPE supplied in the correct manner, and must report wear, damage and/or defects.

For more information see <https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/ppe.htm>

Effective PPE is the first line of defence for those working in the presence of people with COVID. It will not prevent exposure, but will substantially reduce it, slowing infection rates.

PPE for most workers in this category – primarily ambulance workers, care workers and those transporting patients – will be:

- Face Mask – FFP3 is the highest standard (asbestos-level); FFP2 or N95 also acceptable. **Anything is better than nothing**
- Goggles/Eyeglasses or a face visor
- Coveralls or tunic
- Gloves – preferably long and tight fitting

What should employers now be doing?

Risk assessments and COSHH assessments should be performed by a competent person. That person should consult workers on the exposure risk. From this, an assessment should be made of those job roles that are most at risk, and these should be prioritised for PPE. *All workers at high risk from COVID due to underlying health conditions should be either redeployed to home working if possible, or working as far away from high exposure COVID areas wherever possible.*

So the first key action from the employer is to communicate and provide information, then implement simple management processes. **Everyone who can work away from the exposure hazard (people with COVID or symptoms) must do so – at home if at all possible.**

Workers need to know what the position is in terms of PPE supply - what exists, where it is, who gets it and when, and when more is coming.

The second stage is prioritisation - identifying priority workers for the PPE roll out. Many workers who are not directly in contact with the public can have their PPE requirements lessened if they are segregated away from exposure areas.

It is important that employers understand critical job roles, not just in terms of individual skills but team working. Everyone working in areas identified as high risk will need the PPE.

Likewise, it is known that some workers are at higher risk of severe ill-health if they contract COVID. Workers with underlying health conditions, especially those who are currently shielding, will soon be expected to return to the workplace if they cannot work from home. All workers in this category will need individual risk assessments, and be prioritized for provision of PPE.

It is known that BAME workers are at higher risk, and they will also need individual assessments and PPE. Disabled workers will also need individualized assessments and priority access to PPE, as they are at higher risk.

Changes to social distancing will make the need for PPE particularly acute, and employers must be making these assessments as soon as possible.

The third stage is maintaining supply. If supplies are running low, employers should consider cleaning and reusing PPE where this can be done without additional exposure risk. PPE that is designed to be single use and disposable should be disposed of however.

It is then a case of stepping down standards. Using FFP2 or N95 masks rather than FFP3 is acceptable.

If the exposure risk is low, but workers are unable to socially distance for any period of time beyond a fleeting moment, then a risk assessment should be performed, and a face mask will be likely be required.

This may not need to be a FFP mask, but the minimum standard expected is the Type IIR fluid resistant mask. Face coverings, which the UK Government recommend for public travel, are not PPE and as such should not be provided under such circumstances.

Older stocks can be used in emergency situations as anything is better than nothing.

Remember that any PPE that is not CE marked - either on the product or on the packaging - cannot be used as it cannot be guaranteed to confirm to the required standards.

Workers will need to be trained on correct fitting and usage for the PPE to be effective. There may be possibilities for this to be performed remotely by video link. Any face fitting will still need to be performed by a qualified tester – manufacturers and suppliers can help with this.



What can I do next?

GMB is fully engaged with employers on the supply of PPE. We need your help to quickly identify where employers are not providing the PPE that they need to. We have developed a checklist for GMB Safety Reps and post holders to use. **If there are concerns over the supply, fit or quality of PPE PLEASE INFORM GMB AS SOON AS YOU CAN. We can then challenge the employer to resolve the situation.**

GMB is demanding Government action to ensure that all workers who need PPE get it – we need your help to tell us where the gaps are.

Use our [key checklist](#) to make sure you ask employers the right questions.

If you are affected and need further guidance and support please contact GMB at [**publicservices@gmb.org.uk**](mailto:publicservices@gmb.org.uk)

