

COVID-19 EMS Workforce Protection Update

Background

Increases in social activities and travel are resulting in increased community transmission of COVID-19. EMS personnel and managers should be mindful of risks of transmission of COVID-19 not only from patients and the general public but from each other. Herein we provide updated recommendations aimed to limit the spread of SARS-CoV2 among EMS personnel and protect the EMS workforce. This guidance is based on documents linked below and thorough review of the available evidence by infection control experts at UPMC

- **CDC:** <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-risk-assesment-hcp.html>
- **PA DOH:** https://mcusercontent.com/294f12a2d3ce031f02ef68894/files/2d323337-68d9-4239-85d9-2215ce237a48/EMSIB_2020_26_PPE_Reminders_Updated_.pdf
- **ACHD:** <https://www.emswest-covid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/County-Bans-On-Premises-Alcohol-Consumption-Recommends-Quarantine-for-Travelers.pdf>
- **UPMC Prehospital Care: Return to Work Guidance** <https://www.emswest-covid.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/UPMC-PHC-COVID-19-Guidance-on-Return-to-Work-2020-06-04.pdf>.

Masking and Physical Distancing

In health care, we have a special responsibility to take care of ourselves and avoid risky behavior: We could put our patients and our co-workers at risk if we carry the virus into the workplace. We also are role models for the community when it comes to public health. Focusing on safety all the time — at work and elsewhere — is the best way to prevent transmission and limit rapid infection growth.

Always wear a face mask during your shift (except when maintaining proper physical distance during meals or in sleeping quarters).

- As community spread increases in the region, EMS personnel will be a substantial source of potential exposure to each other, especially while in relative proximity in EMS stations and vehicles. A central way to mitigate these potential exposures and avoid preventable quarantine of groups of EMS personnel if an individual on a crew later tests positive for COVID-19 is for all personnel to wear masks, socially distance, and protect themselves from touching common surfaces.
- Make certain the mask covers your *mouth and nose*.
- Avoid touching your mask or face.
- Practice hand hygiene often, especially before putting on and taking off your mask.
- Because you can't wear a mask while eating or drinking, it's important to maintain proper physical distance during meals in kitchens and breakrooms. If that's not possible, keep meals and drinks short so you can properly and quickly mask again.



Scrub your hands. Continue washing your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds to prevent further spread of germs. Most people don't notice how many things they touch, and if food plays a large part in your holiday celebration and other social gatherings, serve it with clean hands.

Keep at least six feet away. Indoor socializing at close range is a definite risk, but even those attending outdoor celebrations need to uphold physical distancing guidelines. Distance provides an extra shield of protection, so it remains vital to avoid close contact with others.

Answering Your Questions:

Q. Allegheny County, PA, is recommending quarantine for 14 days or receiving two COVID-19 tests, 48 hours apart, if I left the state. Is UPMC supporting this recommendation?

A. The county made recommendations, not requirements, and the county recognized the need for interpretation for many different groups of users. Our advice uses both the recommendations and our expert insights and input.

If you are not experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms, and you followed masking and physical distancing recommendations, it is reasonable to self-monitor for illness and return to work if this is consistent with your agency's policies. If you are experiencing symptoms, you should contact your manager and employee health provider and follow their established process. According to UPMC experts, performing two COVID-19 tests within 48 hours is not a reliable way to rule out COVID-19 unless the individual is symptomatic, and a symptomatic individual should not be reporting to work.

If you are not comfortable returning to work because you may have been exposed to COVID-19, discuss your concerns with your manager to see if work accommodations are possible.

Q. My co-worker just returned from vacation and is back to work. How can I ensure that I'll remain safe if they have been exposed?

A. Provided that your co-worker is not displaying symptoms of COVID-19, and both you and your colleague are also adhering to universal masking and physical distancing guidelines, transmission risk is low. If your colleague is symptomatic, they should not be at work and should contact the agency's employee health provider, following their established process. Because individuals cannot control the potential exposures of their coworkers, it is especially important for each of us to stay vigilant while at work, wear a mask whenever around coworkers, and perform other infection control practices in EMS stations, EMS vehicles, and any other work environments.

Q. Should EMS agencies establish policies for universal masking in EMS stations and other locations where EMS personnel are together?

A. Yes. For many reasons explained in this document, a critical way for EMS agencies to protect their personnel, avoid preventable quarantines for exposed staff, and maintain the EMS workforce healthy and working is to encourage universal masking at work. Masking should take place in any common areas and EMS vehicles. Masks may be removed to eat meals or drink where social distancing can be maintained, as well as in individual spaces such as sleeping quarters.

Q. What masks should be used in non-clinical environments?

A. A simple surgical facemask or cloth facemask are reasonable options for use in non-clinical settings and can be maintained for the duration of a shift. Personnel should also be aware that masks with one-way valves do not protect other individuals from the wearer's unfiltered exhaled breath and are not optimal to prevent transmission of virus between individuals, particularly if the other individual is not wearing a mask.