

Managing coronavirus (COVID-19) risks: Face Coverings in workplaces

Information about using face coverings in workplaces in areas under Stage 3 Restrictions, to reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Background

The Victorian Chief Health Officer (CHO) has directed that all persons over 12 years old living in areas under coronavirus (COVID-19) Stage 3 Stay at Home Restrictions wear cloth or surgical face masks or face coverings outside of their home from 11.59pm on 22 July 2020..

The direction is in response to a higher number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases currently occurring across those regions. Wearing a face mask provides a physical barrier to coronavirus (COVID-19), by preventing the spread of droplets generated when talking, coughing or sneezing, which helps to protect others in the community.

For detailed information about the use of face masks see the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) information.

[link to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-covid-19>]

Identifying and controlling risks

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act), employers must provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, by implementing suitable control measures so far as is reasonably practicable.

This can be achieved by applying the hierarchy of controls. The most effective control measures to reduce transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) are to:

- physically isolate, for example by working from home where it is reasonably practicable
- maintain a physical distance of 1.5 metres
- practice good hygiene by washing your hands thoroughly and regularly
- cough or sneeze into a tissue or your elbow
- maintain a thorough routine of cleaning and disinfection
- If working within a Restricted Area, wear a suitable face mask, face covering, shield or barrier. If working outside a restricted area, wear a face covering in situations where physical distancing may not be possible.

The Chief Health Officer has directed that employers must take reasonable steps to ensure that employees wear a face covering at all times when working at the employer's premises.

Where the work or task requires the use of specific types of face coverings in the workplace, these must be provided by the employer.

Where an employee seeks to provide and use their own face covering at work, an employer must ensure that it is meeting its obligations under the OHS Act which includes, so far as is reasonably practicable, providing and maintaining a working environment that is safe and without risks to health.

This includes undertaking a risk assessment, ensuring that the face covering is safe and suitable for the workplace and work activities being performed, providing policies and procedures in relation to the use of face coverings in the workplace and that the employee or independent contractor has received information, instruction and training in the safe use of face masks within the workplace.

Consultation with employees and HSRs

Employers must consult, so far as is reasonably practicable, with employees and health and safety representatives (HSRs), if any, on matters related to health and safety. This includes consulting on how face masks and coverings such as shields are implemented within the workplace.

Consultation with individual employees may be required to identify whether wearing a mask is appropriate for them, taking into account any health conditions they may have. For example, employees who suffer from respiratory issues, such as asthma.

Using face masks in workplaces

Where the work or task requires the use of specific types of face coverings in the workplace, these must be provided by the employer.

The Chief Health Officer has directed that employers must take reasonable steps to ensure that employees wear a face covering at all times when working at the employer's premises.

Employees have a duty to cooperate with their employer's actions to comply with their duties under the OHS Act.

Employees may already wear respiratory protective equipment (RPE) to control risks associated with their work. Where RPE is worn at the workplace, the employer must conduct a risk assessment to ensure that the level of RPE provided controls the risks associated with their work including the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

The CHO direction to wear a mask does not apply to people with breathing difficulties or any other condition that makes it difficult to wear a mask. Employers should seek further advice if they are concerned about vulnerable employees wearing a mask or attending the workplace. For example, by calling the DHHS 24-hour coronavirus (COVID-19) hotline on 1800 675 398.

Face shields may be easier to wear for some individuals who have limited ability to wear masks. If face shields are used, ensure they are properly designed to cover the sides of the face and below the chin. Reusable face shields should be cleaned and disinfected after each use. Disposable face shields should only be worn for single use.

Correct use of masks

Face masks and coverings are only effective when they are worn and maintained correctly. For example, it is very easy for a face mask to lose its effectiveness if it does not fit, if the front is touched whilst wearing it, or if it is not washed or disposed of appropriately.

Employers must also provide information, instruction, training and supervision to employees and contractors on:

- when face masks and/or face coverings are to be worn
- how to put on and wear face masks and/or face coverings correctly to ensure they are effective
- how long face masks and/or face coverings can be worn
- how to remove face masks and/or face coverings safely, including changing masks during shifts
- how to safely store and wash reusable face masks and/or face coverings or dispose of single use masks.

It is particularly important to provide training for reusable cloth masks, including for cleaning and storage. Detailed information about the correct use of face masks is available on the DHHS website (see link under Further information).

Employers need to provide appropriate hygiene amenities for employees to safely put on and remove masks, such as hand washing facilities or alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Where employers provide reusable masks, they should provide facilities for cleaning the masks.

Employees have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, which includes following the information, instruction and training provided on how to correctly wear their face mask.

Legal duties

Employers have duties under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act), which include that they must, so far as is reasonably practicable:

- provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of employees and independent contractors, including psychological health
- provide such information, instruction, training or supervision to employees and independent contractors as is necessary to enable those persons to perform their work in a way that is safe and without risks to health
- monitor the health of employees
- monitor conditions at any workplace under the employer's management and control
- provide information concerning health and safety to employees, including (where appropriate) in languages other than English
- ensure that persons other than employees of the employer are not exposed to risks to their health or safety arising from the conduct of the undertaking of the employer
- consult with employees and HSRs, if any, on matters related to health or safety that directly affect, or are likely to directly affect them

Employees also have duties under the OHS Act, which includes that they must:

- take reasonable care for their own health and safety
- take reasonable care for the health and safety of persons who may be affected by the employee's acts or omissions at a workplace
- co-operate with their employer with respect to any action taken by the employer to comply with a requirement imposed by or under the OHS Act

The OHS Act gives HSRs a role in raising and resolving any OHS issues with their employer, and powers to take issues further if necessary. For more information see the guidance on powers for HSRs (link below).

Further information

- DHHS: Face masks <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/face-masks-covid-19>
- WSV: Exposure to coronavirus in workplaces <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/safety-alerts/exposure-coronavirus-workplaces>
- WSV: Coronavirus (COVID-19) <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19>
- DHHS: Coronavirus (COVI-19) information <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>
- Powers of health and safety representatives <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/powers-health-and-safety-representatives>

